

INTUITIVE AWARENESS



AJAHN SUMEDHO



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Intuitive Awareness by Ajahn Sumedho

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Dedications

In gratitude to our much loved and respected teacher, Ajahn Sumedho, whose devotion to the Dhamma and selfless sharing of his experience and understanding, continues to encourage and enrich the lives of so many people throughout the world.



AWARENESS IS YOUR REFUGE: *Awareness of the changingness of feelings, of attitudes, of moods, of material and emotional change. Stay with that, because it's a refuge that is indestructible. It's not something that changes. It's a refuge you can trust in. This refuge is not something you create. It's not a creation. It's not an ideal. It's practical and very simple but easily overlooked or not noticed. When you're mindful, you're beginning to notice: it's like this.*

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Editors' Preface

This book is compiled from talks given mostly in 2001 by Ajahn Sumedho. The first edition was originally published in 2004, but has long since been out of print. This new edition has been reviewed for typographical errors and redesigned, and some re-editing has been done. However, the Dhamma content has not been changed. The talks were transcribed, edited and proofread by various members of the sangha as well as people from the broader community, and a variety of people helped with the creation of the front cover. The editors wish to express their deep gratitude for all of the generous and kind-hearted effort put into making these teachings available in book format.

Introduction

MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS AGO, in 1984, the germinal monastic community of the newly opened Amaravati Buddhist Centre settled into a cluster of barrack-like buildings on a windy hilltop in Hertfordshire. The name of the new monastery (meaning ‘The Deathless Realm’) had been chosen both as a resonance of the ancient Buddhist city in Andhra Pradesh in southern India, and as a counteractive force to the ‘Mutually Assured Destruction’ of the nuclear arms race, then gleefully being pursued by Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and the Soviet Union.

The meditation space that we used at that time was the former school gymnasium and assembly hall. The windows were cracked, patched with plastic and Sellotape, draughty or missing completely; gym markings criss-crossed the cold wooden floor; the large golden Buddha image sat up on the old school stage, spotlit and surrounded by filmy blue curtains that we had introduced in an attempt to beautify the shrine and suggest the quality of infinite space.

Since 1981, when the community was largely based at Cittaviveka Monastery, in Chithurst, West Sussex, it had been our custom to set

aside the midwinter months, after the New Year, to be a time of communal retreat. At that time of year the English weather does not allow much in the way of building work to go on, visitors are few and the days are short and dark – it is thus a perfect situation to use for turning the attention inward and taking time to cultivate formal meditation practice in a very thorough way.

Amaravati was opened in 1984 in order to provide living space for the burgeoning monastic community (group photos of the time show more than twenty Eight-Precept postulants and forty nuns and monks), and to be a place where we could hold retreats for the public. So when this move was made it provided an even more expansive situation for the winter retreats and for Ajahn Sumedho to continue to guide the community in his inimitably comprehensive and inspiring way.

The winters of 1984, '85 and '86 were spectacularly icy; winds howled down from Siberia, seemingly uninterrupted by any solid object until they bit into our bones. It was not uncommon to be wearing six or seven layers of clothing through the day and then to climb into our sleeping bags at night with most of it still on. We sat bundled up in thick robes and blankets for meditation and to listen to instructional talks. The air was icy but vibrant as there was a powerful and pervasive sense of community spirit among us.

Sometimes, in those days, it seemed that the main source of energy in the whole system, and certainly what our hearts were warmed and guided by, was Ajahn Sumedho's apparently limitless capacity to expound on the Dhamma, especially during the winter retreats. Naturally enough in that situation a lot of guidance was needed – the majority of us were fairly new to meditation and monastic training and needed all the help we could get, particularly within a routine of noble silence and walking and sitting meditation

all day – thus Ajahn Sumedho gave extensive instruction, often two or three times a day. There would be ‘morning reflections’ during the first sitting of the day before dawn, often more reflections after the breakfast of gruel and tea, sometimes ‘questions & answers’ at afternoon teatime, and finally a formal Dhamma talk in the evening.

From those early icy times up until 2010, when he retired from the role of abbot and moved back to Thailand, Ajahn Sumedho continued to guide the monastic community at Amaravati. Every winter he explored and expounded on the Dhamma, and frequently there have been recordings made of his teachings. The book you hold is a small sample of the talks that he offered during the Winter Retreat of 2001.

Even though those days now seem a long way off in some respects, and much has changed, there are some elements that have remained stable to the present day, like a constantly returning phrase or rhythm in a musical piece or, more accurately, like the defining style of a master painter that instantly tells you: this is a Monet, that is a Van Gogh.

Now at Amaravati, the site of the old Dhamma Hall/gymnasium is occupied by the Temple, the new meditation hall constructed in stages through the 1990s. The orientation is slightly different – the building now faces east rather than north – and it is a soaring pyramidal structure, rather than a utilitarian rectangular box. The great light open space within is punctuated with a broad ring of solid oak pillars; it is so silent and still it seems to stop the minds of those who visit; the floor is a blanket of warm white rock, and a barn-like lattice of thick trusses and beams laces the high ceiling and the walls. However, the trees across the courtyard are still the same, just a little taller and fuller, and the brown weatherboarding on the remaining older buildings is edged by frost in the winter morning light just as it was before.

In the same way that some elements of the buildings, and the members of the community, have changed and some have continued, the winter retreat teachings Ajahn Sumedho continued to give for many more years similarly matured and transformed. They were still built upon a foundation of many classic elements – the Four Noble Truths, reflections on the arising and ceasing of the five *khandhas*, teachings on contemplation of mind (*cittānupassanā*) – but the manner of exposition of these and other key elements, as well as his development of particular skilful means (*upāya*) evolved and expanded as the years passed by. Thus, even though the talks gathered in this book can, in some respects, happily stand on their own, it might also be helpful to bear in mind that they exist within a context.

First of all, these talks were given to experienced monastics and a few well-seasoned laypeople. Many who were listening knew Ajahn Sumedho's favourite themes very well, and he knew that they knew them well, therefore often explanatory material is left unsaid and much knowledge is assumed. Just as a musician might play a few notes to evoke a familiar piece and know of their audience: they can fill in the rest, they know that old theme! Or a painter might use a trademark motif thinking: pop in that bowler hat again, they know all the other places it appeared ... Similarly here, Ajahn Sumedho is often exploring, describing and extemporizing on very familiar themes so that, if the reader occasionally feels a lack of explanation, if the meaning escapes one, the encouragement is to let the music, the balance of tones and colours tide you over.

Secondly, the aim of the editors in compiling this book has been explicitly to maintain the style and spirit of the spoken word. Dhamma talks have strong nonverbal element – the mood

in the room, the energetic exchanges between the speaker and the listeners, the season, the hour of the day or night, all that has gone before within the group – so it is wiser to treat a collection of talks such as this as if exploring an art gallery or listening to a musical piece, rather than as a systematic explanation of a fixed subject. As Ajahn Sumedho himself commented, ‘The book is meant to be suggestions of ways to investigate conscious experience. It’s not meant to be a didactic treatise on Pali Buddhism.’

So, as you make your way through these pages, and you encounter ‘Intuitive Awareness’, ‘The End of Suffering is Now’, ‘The Sound of Silence’, and all the others, the suggestion is to let them be received into the heart, to allow them to resonate, and to let the intuitions and guidance that they spark ripen as they will. Just as, when we progress through an art gallery we don’t think, ‘What’s the exact information that this painting is imparting to me?’

Thirdly, ever since the time of the Buddha, his disciples have evinced a wide range of teaching styles and favourite themes when expounding the Dhamma. And this same variety is a striking characteristic of what is known today as the Thai Forest Tradition – the largely non-academic, meditation-centred, rural monastic communities that model their way of practice on the discipline and lifestyle of the Buddha and his earliest monastic disciples.

Over time an individual teacher will tend to take a particular Dhamma theme, or meditation technique, and spend years, sometimes decades exploring and expanding on that topic. For example, Luang Por Sim was noted for his emphasis on death contemplations; Ajahn Buddhadasa spent several years discoursing on *idapaccayatā* – the law of conditionality; Ajahn Toon Khippapañño vigorously insists the Path should be represented as *paññā, sīla, samādhi*, NOT as *sīla, samādhi, paññā*; Ajahn Fun was

known for his infinite extrapolations on the word ‘*Buddho*’ – either as a concentration technique, an investigation of awareness or as a devotional practice; Luang Pu Dun was known for his teachings on ‘*citta* (the heart) is Buddha;’ and Ajahn Chah was fond of putting conundrums to people, such as ‘If you can’t go forward, you can’t go back and you can’t stand still – where can you go?’ Or ‘Have you ever seen still, flowing water?’

Over time it is quite usual for such experienced teachers to develop not only their favourite themes but also to cultivate their own, often idiosyncratic usage of scriptural terms. For example, Ajahn Maha Boowa’s usage of the term ‘eternal *citta*’, Ajahn Toon’s insistence on the radical difference between *dassanañāṇa* and *ñāṇadassana*, which can be translated as ‘vision and knowledge’ and ‘knowledge and vision’; or the word ‘*sakkhibhūto*’ which Ajahn Chah employed to mean ‘a witness to the truth’, yet Pali scholars continue to wonder exactly where the term came from. In this light it might be useful to take a look at some of the terms that Ajahn Sumedho uses frequently in this collection – particularly ‘the sound of silence’, ‘intuitive awareness’ and ‘consciousness’ – that have taken on such distinctive meanings over the years.

The first of these, ‘the sound of silence’, is described in the Dhamma talk of the same name in quite some detail. However, as it is not a meditation method found in classical Theravada handbooks, it might be helpful to provide a little background to the way in which Ajahn Sumedho came to develop it, and to refer to some of the other spiritual traditions that use it as part of a meditation practice.

It was in the Winter Retreat of January 1981, at Chithurst Monastery, that Ajahn Sumedho first started to teach this method to the monastic community. He said that he had begun to notice

the high-pitched, ringing tone when he left Thailand in 1977 and spent his first winter in England, in the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara. He pointed out that, as Thailand was such a noisy country, particularly amidst the crickets and cicadas in the forest at night (when one does most formal meditation practice), that he had not noticed this inner sound before. However, when he came to London, despite being a large metropolis, he found that it became very quiet late at night, especially when the air was muffled by the presence of a blanket of snow.

In the silence of those nights he began to perceive the ever-present inner sound, seemingly beginningless and endless, and he soon found that he was able to discern it throughout the day, and in many circumstances, whether quiet or busy. He also realized that he had indeed noticed it once before in his life, when he had been on shore leave from the US Navy in the late 1950s and when, during a walk in the hills, his mind had opened into a state of extreme clarity. He remembered that as a wonderfully pure and peaceful state, and he recalled that the sound had been very loud then, so those positive associations encouraged him to experiment and see if it might be a useful meditation object. It also seemed to be an ideal symbol, in the conditioned world of the senses, of those qualities of mind that transcend the sense realm: not subject to personal will; ever-present but only noticed if attended to; apparently beginningless and endless; formless, to some degree; and spatially unlocated.

When he first taught it to the sangha at Chithurst that winter, he referred to it as ‘the sound of silence’ and the name stuck. Later, as he began to teach the method on retreats for the lay community, he began to hear about its use from people experienced in Hindu and Sikh meditation practices. He found out that this form of concentration on the inner sound was known as ‘nada yoga’ or ‘the yoga of inner

light and sound’ in these traditions. It also turned out that books had been written on the subject, commentaries in English as well as ancient scriptural treatises, notable among these being *The Way of Inner Vigilance* by Salim Michael (originally published by Signet and later republished as *The Law of Attention* by Inner Traditions). In 1991, when he taught it as a method on a retreat at a Chinese monastery in the USA, one of the participants was moved to comment that, ‘I think you have stumbled on the Shurangama *samādhi*; there is a meditation on hearing that is described in that sutra and the practice you have been teaching us seems to match it perfectly.’

Seeing that it was a practice that was very accessible to a number of people, and as his own explorations of it deepened over the years, Ajahn Sumedho has continued to develop it as a central method of meditation, ranking alongside such classical forms of practice as mindfulness of breathing and investigation of the body. The Buddha’s encouragement for his students was to use skilful means that are effective in freeing the heart. Since this form of meditation seems to be very supportive for that, despite not being included in lists of meditation practices in the Pali Canon or anthologies such as the *Visuddhimagga*, it seems wholly appropriate to give it its due. For surely it is the freedom of the heart that is the purpose of all the practices that are done – and that freedom is the final arbiter of what is useful, and therefore good.

The second of the terms that Ajahn Sumedho has given particular meaning to here is ‘intuitive awareness.’ As with the sound of silence there are many places in the talks contained here, particularly in the talk ‘Intuitive Awareness’ itself, where he elucidates the ways in which he is using this term. However, it might be helpful here to reflect a little on its usage, just to clarify that in relation to other ways of employing the same words.

There are numerous places throughout the book where, when the phrase ‘intuitive awareness’ is used, the words ‘*sati-sampajañña*’ are used immediately after, meaning that the former is a translation of the latter. The quality of *sati-sampajañña*/intuitive awareness is used to refer to part of a continuum which begins with *sati*, the raw mindful cognizance of an object; the second element being *sati-sampajañña*, referring to the mindful, intuitive awareness of an object within its context; the final element is ‘*satipaññā*’ – usually translated as ‘mindfulness-and-wisdom’ – which refers to the appreciation of an object in respect to its essential nature as transitory, unsatisfactory and not-self. Ajahn Chah used to characterize the relationship between these three elements as being like the hand, arm and body: *sati* is that which picks things up, *sampajañña* is like the arm that enables the hand to get to the required place, *paññā* is the body which provides it with the life force and the directive element.

Throughout these talks Ajahn Sumedho develops the connection between the terms ‘*sati-sampajañña*’ and ‘intuitive awareness.’ In so doing he is endeavouring to clarify and expand the common renderings of *sampajañña* as ‘clear comprehension’ or even ‘self awareness.’ His chief concern is, as he states on p. 15, that this phrase does not give a sense of the true broadness of that clarity. Thus he is experimenting with an expression that conveys a deliberately expansive quality and that includes the element of mystery; for it is important for the English wording also to imply an attunement of the heart to experiences that the thinking mind cannot understand or that, as he says, are ‘foggy, confused or uncertain.’ The word ‘intuitive’ is used because it perfectly conveys the mixture of a genuine apprehension of reality, yet also that the reason why things are the way they are might not be at all apparent.

The final, and perhaps most significant, term to look at in this light is ‘consciousness’. The Pali word ‘*viññāṇa*’ is almost invariably translated into English as ‘consciousness’. In Buddhist psychology ‘*viññāṇa*’ generally means a discriminative consciousness that acts via one of the six sense-doors: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind. It means the act of cognizing a knowable object. However, this is not the only way that the Buddha uses the term.

As Ajahn Sumedho mentions on p. 106, there are two places in the discourses where a substantially different set of qualities are associated with the term. The phrase that he quotes, *viññāṇam anidassanam anantam sabbato pabham*, comes in part from Dīgha Nikāya 11.85, in the Kevaddha Sutta, and in part at Majjhima Nikāya 49.25, in the Brahmanimantanika Sutta. The former passage comes at the end of a colourful and lengthy teaching tale recounted by the Buddha. He tells of a monk in the mind of whom the question arises: ‘I wonder where it is that the four great elements – Earth, Water, Fire and Wind – cease without remainder?’ Being a skilled meditator, the bhikkhu in question enters a state of absorption and ‘the path to the gods becomes open to him.’ He begins by putting his question to the first gods he meets, the retinue of the Four Heavenly Kings, the guardians of the world; they demur, saying that they do not know the answer, but that the Four Kings themselves probably do: he should ask them. He does, they do not and the search continues. Onward and upward through successive heavens he travels, continually being met with the same reply: ‘We do not know but you should try asking ...’ and is referred to the next higher level of the celestial hierarchy. Patiently enduring the protracted process of this cosmic chain of command, he finally arrives in the presence of the retinue of Mahā Brahmā, he puts the question to them; once again they fail to produce an answer but they assure

him that The Great Brahmā Himself, should He deign to manifest, is certain to provide him with the resolution he seeks. Sure enough, before too long, Mahā Brahmā appears but he too does not know the answer, and he chides the monk for being a disciple of the Buddha yet not going to his own teacher with such a question.

When he finally meets the Buddha and asks him, he receives the reply: ‘But, monk, you should not ask your question in this way: “Where do the four great elements – Earth, Water, Fire and Wind – cease without remainder?” Instead, this is how the question should have been put:

“Where do earth, water, fire and wind,
And long and short, and fine and coarse,
Pure and impure no footing find?
Where is it that both *nāma* (name) and *rūpa* (form) fade out,
Leaving no trace behind?”

‘And the answer is:

“In the awakened consciousness –
the invisible, the limitless, radiant.

[*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato pabhaṃ*]

There it is that earth, water, fire and wind,
And long and short, and fine and coarse,
Pure and impure no footing find.

There it is that both *nāma* and *rūpa* fade out,
Leaving no trace behind.

When discriminative consciousness comes to its limit,
They are held in check therein.”

The term *anidassana-viññāṇa* has been translated in various other ways: ‘where consciousness is signless’ (Walshe), ‘the consciousness that makes no showing’ (Ñāṇamoli) and, most helpfully, by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda, in his book *Concept and Reality* (p. 59), as ‘non-manifestative consciousness.’ It is unlikely that the English language has a single term that can accurately convey the constellation of meanings that *anidassana-viññāṇa* possesses, however it is generally this set of qualities that Ajahn Sumedho is referring to when he uses the simple term ‘consciousness’.

As Ajahn Sumedho also says, on p. 106, it is ‘a mouthful of words that point to this state of natural consciousness, this reality.’ So it should be borne in mind by the reader that, most of the time, he is quite deliberately using the single word ‘consciousness’ as a shorthand for ‘*anidassana-viññāṇa*.’ Naturally, the word is also used in various places with its customary scriptural meaning of discriminative cognizing, as well as in the sense of ‘re-birth consciousness’ (*patisandhi-viññāṇa*), for example, on p. 109, ‘When we are born into a physical birth, we have consciousness within this form ...’. In addition, Ajahn Sumedho also occasionally uses the word in the ordinary English sense, i.e. describing the state of not being unconscious, being awake and aware of one’s surroundings and identity.

An obvious parallel to Ajahn Sumedho’s usage of the word ‘consciousness’ is the Thai phrase ‘*poo roo*’ as employed by many of the Forest Ajahns. The literal translation is: ‘*poo*’ = ‘person’ + ‘*roo*’ = ‘knowing’. It has been variously rendered as ‘knowing’, ‘the one who knows’, ‘awareness’ or even ‘Buddha wisdom.’ It is also a term that can be used to convey a large spectrum of meanings from, at one end, the simple act of the mind cognizing an object (as in classical definitions of *viññāṇa*), through varying levels of refinement (as in

being the witness of phenomena arising and passing away), up to the utterly unobstructed awareness of the fully awakened heart.

So it can mean everything from simple ‘cognition’ to ‘the wisdom of a fully enlightened Buddha.’ And, just as with Ajahn Sumedho’s employment of the word ‘consciousness’, it is necessary with the term ‘*poo roo*’ to look at the context, and to take into account the favourite expressions of the ajahn in question, in order to discern the intended nuances of meaning – ergo, reader be aware!

Since there are such a variety of meanings contingent upon the one word ‘consciousness’ in this book, it would thus be wise for the reader always to reflect on the circumstance that the word is being used in. In this light, it might be felt by some that it would have been more helpful not to have used ‘consciousness’ in such a broad range of ways, that perhaps sticking to more familiar terminology might have been easier on the listeners and readers – perhaps using a word like ‘*citta*’, the heart, as defining the agent of pure awareness, instead of ‘*anidassana viññāṇa*’ – however, this is not the way that such organic and freestyle methods of teaching usually work.

It has been the explicit aim of the editors of this book to maintain the spontaneous and informal style of Ajahn Sumedho’s spoken words. All of his talks are extemporaneous, taking shape as they are expressed according to the needs of the listeners present. And part of this methodology of instruction is that it often demands that the listener/reader expand their range of view of what the teaching and practice is, and how certain words can and should be used. Furthermore, this spontaneous and direct method of expounding the Dhamma encourages the participants to allow themselves to be changed by what they see and hear, rather than judge it according to whether or not it complies with familiar and favoured patterns

of thinking. Are we going to complain to Van Gogh that 'A church built like that would never stand up!'? Probably not ...

So, as you, the reader, wend your way through these pages and explore this small gallery of Ajahn Sumedho's teachings, it is our fond hope that you find here words and images that help to awaken and free the heart. Whatever is thus meaningful and good, please take it and install it in your life, and whatever is not, please leave it and pass it by in peace.

Amaro Bhikkhu

Intuitive Awareness

IN TERMS OF APPLYING THE EXPRESSIONS used by the Buddha for practical purposes, I have found it very helpful to contemplate the difference between analytical thinking and intuitive awareness. In analytical thinking, we use the mind to analyze, reason, criticize, to have ideas, perceptions, views and opinions. Intuitive awareness is non-critical; it can include criticism. It's not that criticism isn't allowed, but the critical mind is seen as an object. With the tendency to criticize or compare, to hold one view saying 'this is better than that', 'this is right and that is wrong', criticism of yourself or others or whatever – all of this can be justified and valid at the level of critical thinking. But we're not interested in developing our critical faculty, because usually in countries like this it's highly developed already. Instead, we are learning to trust in intuitive awareness, *sati-sampajañña*.

Sampajañña is a word that is translated into English as 'clear-comprehension', which is rather vague. Even though it says 'clear', it doesn't give a sense of the broadness of that clarity. When you have clear definitions of everything, you think you have clear

comprehension. We don't like confusion. We don't like to feel foggy, confused or uncertain. We really dislike these kinds of mind-states, so we spend a lot of time trying to have clear comprehension and certainty. But *sampajañña* includes fogginess, includes confusion; it includes uncertainty and insecurity. It's a clear comprehension or the apperception of confusion – recognizing it's like *this*. Uncertainty and insecurity are like *this*. So it's a clear comprehension or apprehension of even the most vague, amorphous or nebulous mental conditions.

Some people find this approach frustrating because it's easier to be told exactly what to do, to have a more methodical approach. But many of us have done that – and even though it can be very skilful, it can also become addictive. We never get to the root of the cause, which is, 'I am this person who needs something in order to become enlightened.' This intuitive approach does not exclude methodical meditations. It's not that I'm against the methods of meditation that exist in our tradition of Theravada Buddhism – not at all – but in saying this I am trying to put them into perspective. If you do go to different meditation retreats, courses or whatever, intuitive awareness will help you do the method practised there in a much more skilful way than if you just start from faith in a method. This encourages you to question, to really look into and see beyond the ignorant perceptions you have of yourself, whatever they might be. If you think you're the best, greatest, God's gift to the world, or you think you're the absolute bottom of the stack; if you don't know who you are and what you want; if sometimes you think you're superior but sometimes you feel that you're inferior – these things change.

The personality view, along with attachment to rituals and techniques and doubt are the first three fetters that hide the Path

and keep us from seeing the way of non-suffering.* Trying to figure out how to be aware is an impossible task – ‘What is he talking about, anyway? Wake up, be aware?’ – you just go around in circles. Intuitive awareness is frustrating to an analytical person whose faith is in thought, reason and logic. Awareness is right now. It’s not a matter of thinking about it, but instead being *aware* of thinking about it. How do you do that?

My insight came when I was a samanera, a novice monk. ‘How do you stop thinking? Just stop thinking. Well, how do you stop? Just stop. How do you just stop?’ The mind would always come back with, ‘How? How can you do it?’ wanting to figure it out rather than trusting in the immanence of it. Trusting is relaxing into it; it’s just attentiveness, which is an act of faith; it’s a trustiness, *saddhā*. It gives us perspective on anything we want to do, including other styles of meditation. Even training the physical body with these various mindful practices – yoga, tai chi, qigong and things like that – can fit well into the intuitive approach. Ultimately, when we develop these techniques, it ends up that one has to trust in the mindfulness rather than in just ‘me and my wilful efforts.’

I remember when I started practising hatha yoga years ago, I’d see pictures of yogis doing all these fantastic postures and I wanted to do them – the really impressive ones. I had a big ego and didn’t want to do the boring kinds of things that you start out with, but aimed at the fantastic. Of course, you’re going to damage yourself trying to make your body do what you want before it’s ready – so that’s pretty dangerous! Intuition is also knowing the limits of your own body, what it can take. It’s not just wilfully making it

*The Pali words for the first three fetters are as follows: *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, *silabbata-parāmāsa* and *vicikicchā* (personality view, attachment to rituals and techniques, and doubt).

do this and do that according to your ideas or ideals of what you want it to do. As many of you know, you can damage the body quite badly through tyrannically forcing it to do something. Yet mindfulness and clear comprehension, *sati-sampajañña*, includes the body and its limitations; its disabilities and its sicknesses as well as its health and pleasures.

Us Theravada Buddhists, especially the celibate monastic community, can easily see sensual pleasure as something we shouldn't enjoy. The Western mind will also easily see it in terms of denying pleasure, happiness and joy. We say the body is foul, loathsome, filled with excrement, pus and slime and things like that; we do these *asubha* practices. Our line is that if you're a monk, you should never look at a woman – keep your eyes down – and you shouldn't indulge in the pleasures of beauty, of anything. In Thailand I remember hearing that I shouldn't even look at a flower, because its beauty would capture me and make me think worldly thoughts. Moreover, because I'm from a Christian background, (which has a strong puritanical ethic to it) it's easy to assume that sense-pleasure is bad and that it's dangerous, and that you've got to try to deny it and avoid it at all costs. But then that's another opinion and view that comes out of an analytical mind.

From my cultural background, the logic in seeing the foulness and loathsomeness of the body, as in the *asubha* practices, fits in with being repelled – you see the body as something absolutely disgusting. Sometimes you can even look at yourself when you're fairly healthy and you feel disgusted – at least I can. It's a natural way to feel about yourself if you identify with the body and you dwell on its less appealing aspects. But the word 'loathsome' is not a very good translation for the Pali word *asubha*. To me, 'loathsome' is feeling really repelled and averse. If something is loathsome, it's

dirty and foul, bad and nasty; you just develop aversion and want to get rid of it. But *asubha* means ‘non-beautiful.’ *Subha* is beautiful; *asubha* is non-beautiful. That puts it in a better context of looking at what is not beautiful and noticing it. Usually we don’t notice. In the worldly life, we tend to give our attention to the beautiful, and the non-beautiful we either ignore, reject or don’t pay any attention to. We dismiss it because it’s just not very attractive. The vowel ‘a’ in *asubha* is a negation, so noticing the ‘non-beautiful’ is for me a better way of understanding *asubha* practice.

Some of you have seen autopsies. I don’t find that these lead to depression or aversion. Contemplating a dead human body at an autopsy when they’re cutting it up, if you’ve never seen it before, can be pretty shocking. The smells and the appearance – you can feel averse to it at first. But if you can stay beyond the initial reaction of shock and aversion, and with *sati-sampajañña* be open to all of this experience, then what I find is a sense of dispassion, which is a cool feeling. It’s very clear, very cool and very pleasant to be dispassionate. It’s not dispassion through dullness or through intellectual cynicism. It’s just a feeling of non-aversion. Dispassion arises when we no longer see the human body in such a standard way, as being either attractive and beautiful or ugly and foul. Instead, it’s being able to relate to it, whether it’s our own body, somebody else’s or a corpse, in terms of *sati-sampajañña* – and that opens the way to the experience of dispassion, *virāga*.

Lust, on the other hand, is a lack of discrimination. The experience of sexual lust is a strong passion that takes you over and you lose your discriminative abilities. The more you absorb into it, the less discriminatory you get. It’s interesting that critical people, the *dosacarita* or anger/aversion types, usually like the *asubha* practices. They like very methodical

meditations: ‘You do this and then you do that, stage one, stage two,’ intellectually very well presented in a nice little outline. If you’re critical, it’s easy to see the body as foul and disgusting. A *kāmarāgacarita*, a lustful, greedy type person, they like loving-kindness, *mettā* meditation, the best. You teach *mettā* and they’re delighted, because with *mettā* you are not being critical about anything

So these are *upāya*, or skilful means, to get perspective. If one is a lustful type, then the *asubha* practices can be very balancing. They can be skilfully used for developing a more discriminative awareness of the unpleasantness, of the non-beautiful. For the *dosacarita* there is *mettā* meditation, which is a willingness to accept what you don’t like without indulging in being critical, rejecting and averse to it. It can be done in a stylized way, but basically it’s *sati-sampajañña*, which accepts, includes. *Mettā* is inclusive, and much more intuitive than conceptual thinking.

When you try to conceive of *mettā* as ‘love’, loving something in terms of liking it, it makes it impossible to sustain when you get to things you can’t stand, people you hate and things like that. *Mettā* is very hard to come to terms with on a conceptual level. To love your enemies, to love people you hate or can’t stand, is an impossible dilemma on the conceptual level. But in terms of *sati-sampajañña*, it involves acceptance – because it’s about including everything you like and dislike. *Mettā* is not analytical; it’s not dwelling on why you hate somebody. It’s not trying to figure out why I hate this person, but it includes the whole thing – the feeling, the person, myself – all in the same moment. So it’s an embracing, a focus that includes and is non-critical. You’re not trying to figure out anything, but just being open, accepting and patient with it.

With food, for instance, we eat here in the *dhutanga*[†] tradition – that is, eating from alms-bowls. I, at least, can no longer convince myself that I’m only eating one meal a day, because of this breakfast we are offered. But, however many meals a day we eat, we are encouraged to use restraint: not because there’s anything wrong with enjoying a meal; it’s not that food is dangerous and that any kind of pleasure you receive from eating will bind you to rebirth again in the *samsāra-vatṭa* (the cycle of birth and death) – that’s another view and opinion. It’s a matter of recognizing the simplicity of the life that we have. It simplifies everything. This is why I like this way.

Just notice your attitude towards food. The greed, the aversion or the guilt about eating or enjoying good food – include it all. There’s no attitude that you must have towards food other than an attitude of *sati-sampajañña*. It’s not making eating into any hassle. When I used to go on fasts, Ajahn Chah would point out that I was making a hassle out of my food. I couldn’t just eat; I was making it more difficult than it needed to be. Then there is the guilt that comes up if you eat too much or you find yourself trying to get the good bits. It gets complicated. I couldn’t just be greedy and shameless, I also had to have a strong sense of guilt around it and hope that nobody would notice. I had to keep it a secret, because I didn’t want to look greedy, I wanted to look as if I weren’t.

I remember that whilst staying with Luang Por Jun, I was trying to be a strict vegetarian, really strict. At his monastery, Wat Bung Khao Luang, they had certain kinds of dishes that didn’t have any fish sauce in them, or any kind of meat or fish. But, as most of you know, in Thailand most of the food has fish sauce or some kind of

[†]*dhutanga*: austere.

animal mixtures in it. So it was difficult because I had very little choice, and people would always have to make special things for me. I always had to be special. It had to be Phra Sumedho's food and then the rest. That was hard to deal with – to be a foreigner, a *phra farang*, and then to have a special diet and special privileges. That was hard for me to impose on the group. As I was helping to pass out the food, I'd get very possessive. I felt I had a right to have a lot of the vegetable dishes they did have, because the other monks were eating all the fish, chicken and things like that. I found myself aiming for the vegetarian dishes first so that I could pass them out according to my own needs. It brought up a really childish tendency in me. Then one day another monk saw me doing this, so he grabbed the vegetarian dish first and only gave me a little spoonful. I was so angry when I saw that. I took this fermented fish sauce, this really strong stuff, and when I went past his bowl, I splattered it all over his food! Fortunately, we were forbidden to hit each other. This is an absolute necessity for men – to have rules against physical violence!

I was trying to live up to an ideal of vegetarian purity, and yet in the process having violent feelings towards other monks. What's this about? It was a vindictive act to splatter all that strong chilli sauce with rotten fish in it over some monk's food. It was a violent act in order for me to keep a sense that I'm a pure vegetarian. So I began to question whether I wanted to make food into such a big deal in my life. Was I wanting to live my life as a vegetarian or what? Was that the main focus that I was aiming at? Just contemplating this, I began to see the suffering I created around my idealism. I noticed Ajahn Chah certainly enjoyed his food and he had a joyful presence. It wasn't like an ascetic trip where you're eating nettle soup and rejecting the good bits; that's the other extreme.

Sati-sampajañña includes, and that's the attitude of a *samaña*, a contemplative, rather than the ascetic who says, 'Sensual temptations, the sensual world, sensual pleasures are bad and dangerous. You've got to fight against them and resist them at all costs in order to become pure. Once you get rid of sexual desire, greed for food, all these other kinds of greedy sense things – these coarse, gross things – you don't have any more bad thoughts, you don't have any more greed, hatred and delusion in your mind. You're absolutely sterilized from any of those things. They're eradicated, totally wiped out like toilet cleansers that kill every germ in sight – then you're pure.' Then you've managed to kill everything – including yourself. Is that the aim? That's taking asceticism to the position of annihilation, *attakilamathānuyoga* or self-torture.

Or there is the opposite extreme of *kāmasukhallikānuyoga*, sensual indulgence, 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you may die. Enjoy life. Life is a banquet and most of the suckers are starving to death.' This is a quote from a fifties movie called *Auntie Mame*. Auntie Mame managed to really enjoy life, in the movie anyway. She's not a real woman but a kind of icon of intelligence and beauty, one who just lives life to the hilt and enjoys everything. That's a very attractive idol: one who thinks this life is meant to be full of pleasure, happiness and love. Grasping that is *kāmasukhallikānuyoga*.

For the *samaña*, it's a matter of awakening to these extremes; awareness includes both. It's not like taking sides – that we're rejecting or condemning Auntie Mame and 'Life is a banquet,' or the extreme ascetic, the life-denying annihilator. But we can see that these are conditions we create in our minds. Always wanting life to be at its best, a party, a banquet, one pleasure after another, or thinking to have any pleasure or enjoyment is wrong and bad, that it's lesser and dangerous; these are conditions we

create. But the *samaṇa* life is right now, it's like *this*. It's opening to what we tend not to notice when we're seeking these two extremes as our goal.

Life is like *this*. You can't say it's a banquet all the time. Breath going in ... I wouldn't describe it as a banquet, or that the sound of silence is life at its best, where it's just one laugh after another. Most of our experience is neither one extreme nor another; it's like *this*. Most of one's life is not peak moments, either in the heights or the depths, but it's neither-nor, it's that which we don't notice if we're primed to extremes.

In terms of beauty, for example, I find it helpful to come from *sati-sampajañña* rather than from personal attachment. With beautiful objects, beautiful things, beautiful people or whatever – coming from personal habits is dangerous because of the desire to possess them, to have them for yourself, or be attracted and get overwhelmed by the desires that arise from seeing beauty through ignorance. With experiencing beauty from *sati-sampajañña*, one can just be aware of the beauty as beauty. It also includes one's own tendencies to want to own it, take it, touch it or fear it; it includes that. When you're letting go of that, then beauty itself is joy.

We live on a planet that is quite beautiful. Nature is quite beautiful to the eye. Seeing it from *sati-sampajañña*, I experience joy from that. When we speak from personal habits, then it can get complicated with wanting and not wanting, with guilt or just not even noticing. If you get too involved with what's in your head, after awhile you don't even notice anything outside. You can be in the most beautiful place in the world and not see it, not notice it. Seeing beauty or sense-pleasures just as experiences is seeing something for what it is. It is pleasurable; good food does taste good, and tasting a good, delicious flavour is like *this*; it's purely enjoyable.

That's the way it is. You may contemplate, 'Oh, I shouldn't' – then you're adding more to it. But from *sati-sampajañña*, it is what it is. It's experiencing the flow of life from this centre point, from the still point that includes rather than from the point that excludes – the extreme where we want only the beautiful and the good, just to have one banquet after another. When we can't sustain that delusion we get depressed. We go to the opposite, wanting to kill or annihilate ourselves in some way.

Just like this weather we've been having – it's the kind that people think England has all the time: cold, wet, damp, drizzly and grey. This is the worldwide perception of England. I decided to open to these conditions with *sati-sampajañña*. It is what it is, but I'm not creating aversion to it. It's all right, and isn't like this very often. I've lived in this country for twenty-four years. Some of the most beautiful weather I ever experienced has been here in this country. Perfect days, so beautiful: the greenness, the beautiful flowers and hills. *Sati-sampajañña* includes the cold, wet, drizzly and grey weather. There's no aversion created in it. In fact, I find I like it in a way, because I don't feel compelled to go out in it. I can sit in my *kuṭi*[‡] and keep warm. I quite enjoy feeling that I don't have to go out anywhere just because the weather is so good. I can stay in my room, which I quite like; it has a nice feeling to it. When the weather gets good I always feel I should be out. These are ways of just noticing that, even with sensory experiences that can be physically unpleasant, like cold and dampness, the suffering is really in the aversion. 'I don't like this. I don't want life to be like this. I want to be where there are blue skies and sunshine all the time.'

[‡]*kuṭi*: a small monastic dwelling.

With the body-sweeping practice, I found paying attention to neutral sensation very helpful because it was so easily ignored. Years ago, when I first started doing this, I found it difficult because I'd never paid attention to neutral sensations, even though they're quite obvious. My experience of sensation was always through the extremes of either pleasure or pain. But you can notice how the robe touches the skin, just one hand touching the other, the tongue in the mouth touching the palate or the teeth, or the upper lip resting on the lower – investigate little details of sensation that are there when you open to them. They are there but you don't notice them unless you're determined to. If your lips are painful you notice. If you're getting a lot of pleasure from your lips, you notice. But when it's neither pleasure nor pain, there's still sensation but it's neutral. So you're allowing neutrality to be conscious.

Consciousness is like a mirror; it reflects. A mirror reflects but it doesn't just reflect the beautiful or the ugly. If you really look into a mirror, it's reflecting whatever: the space, the neutrality, everything that is in front of it. Usually you can only notice the outstanding things, the extremes of beauty or ugliness. But to awaken to the way it is, you're not looking at the obvious but recognizing the subtlety behind the extremes of beauty and ugliness. The sound of silence is like a subtlety behind everything that you awaken to, because you usually don't notice it if you're seeking the extremes.

When you're seeking happiness and trying to get away from pain and misery, then you're caught in always trying to get something or hold on to happiness, like tranquillity. We want *samatha* and *jhānas* – steady and absorbed states of mind – because we like tranquillity. We don't want confusion, chaos or cacophony, abrasive sensory experiences or human contacts. We come into

the Temple and sit down, close our eyes and give off the signs: ‘Don’t bother me. Leave me alone. I’m going to get my *samādhi*.’ That can be the very basis for our practice, ‘Getting my *samādhi* so I can feel good, because I want that.’ That leads to an extreme again – wanting, always grasping after the ideal of some refined conscious experience. Then there are others who say, ‘You don’t need to do that. Daily life is good enough. Just in-the-marketplace practice, that’s where it’s at – where you’re not doing anything extreme like sitting, closing your eyes, but living life as an ordinary person and being mindful of everything.’ That can be another ideal that we attach to.

These are ideals – positions that we might take. They are the ‘true but not right; right but not true’ predicament that we create with our dualistic mind – not that they’re wrong. In George Orwell’s novel *Animal Farm* there is a slogan: ‘Everyone is equal but some are more equal than others.’ In the conditioned realm, this is how we think. We think all human beings are equal, ideally. All human beings are equal, but with the practicalities of life, some are more equal than others. You won’t find the affluent Western world willing to give up much for the sake of equality in the Third World.

Reflect on the monastic form. It’s a convention and its aim is connected to the world through its alms-mendicancy. We need society, we need the world around us, we need the lay community for our survival. They are a part. Monasticism is not an attack on or a rejection of lay life. If we’re living in the right way, then the lay community bring forth their good qualities: generosity, gratitude and things like this. We can also move towards silence, meditation and reflection – this is encouraged. We can combine both *samatha* and *vipassanā*, tranquillity and insight – and the

life of solitude with the life in the world. It's not to reject one and hold on to the other as the ideal, but to recognize this is the way it is; it's like *this*. The world we live in, the society we live in – we're not rejecting it, turning against it or away from it, but including it. We can include it in the silence and the solitude.

Identity

IS THERE ANY PERSON OR CONDITION that is absolutely right or absolutely wrong? Can right and wrong or good and bad be absolute? When you dissect it, when you really look at it in terms of the way it is now, there is nothing to it; it's foam on the sea, it's soap bubbles. Yet this is how we can get ourselves completely caught up in illusions.

We'll sacrifice our life for an illusion, to try and protect our identities, our positions, our territories. We're very territorial. We think England belongs to the English. When we take that apart, does this plot of land here say it's England? When I do *jongrom** outside, does the earth come up and say, 'You're walking on me – England.' It's never said that! But I say I'm walking here in England – I'm the one who's calling it England – and that is an identity, a conventional identity. We all agree to call this plot of land here 'England', but it's not really that; it is what it is. Yet we'll fight, torture and commit the most atrocious acts over territory, quibbling about just one inch of property on a border. The land doesn't belong to anybody. Even

**jongrom*: walking meditation.

if I own land legally – ‘This belongs to Ajahn Sumedho’ – it doesn’t really. That’s just a convention.

When we bind ourselves to these conventions and illusions, then of course we’re troubled because they are so unstable and not in line with Dhamma. We end up wasting our lives trying to increase this sense of identification, the sense of, ‘It’s mine, it belongs to me and I want to protect it. I want to hand it down to future generations.’ We go on and on like this, into future lives and the generations that follow. We create a whole realm of illusion, personality and identity with the perceptions that we create in our minds, and that arise and cease with no real core to them, no essence.

We can be very threatened when these illusions are threatened. I remember first questioning the reality of my personality. It scared me to death. When I started questioning it, I was not particularly overconfident or had high self-esteem. I have never been prone towards megalomania; usually the opposite, very self-critical – and yet I felt threatened when that security, that confidence in being this screwed-up personality, was being threatened. There is a sense of stability even with people who are identified with illnesses or negative things, like alcoholics. Being identified with some sort of mental disease like paranoia, schizophrenia or whatever, gives us a sense that we know what we are, and can justify why we are that way. We can say, ‘I can’t help the way I am. I’m a schizophrenic.’ That gives us permission to be a certain way. We gain confidence or stability when our identities are labelled and we all agree to look at each other in this way, in terms of this label, this perception.

So you realize the kind of courage it takes to question, to allow the illusory world we have created to fall apart – such as with a nervous breakdown when the world falls apart. When the safety and confidence that we gain from that illusion starts cracking and

falling apart, it's very frightening. Yet within us there's something that guides us through it. For example, what brings us into this monastic life? It's some intuitive sense, a sense behind the sense, an intelligence behind all the knowledge and the cleverness of our minds. Yet we can't claim it on a personal level. We always have to let go of the personal perceptions, because as soon as we claim them, we're creating another illusion again. Instead of claiming, identifying or attaching, we begin to realize or recognize the way it is. This is the practice of awareness, of *sati-sampajañña*, of paying attention. In other words, it's going to the centre point of our minds, to the *Buddho* position, 'the one who knows.' If you look at this statue of the Buddha here in the Temple, it's a symbol, an image representing the human form at that still point.

There is this encouragement to practise what we call 'meditation'. The word 'meditation' can mean all kinds of things. It's a word that includes any kind of mental practice, good or bad. But when I use this word, what I'm mainly using it for is that sense of centring, that sense of establishing, resting in the centre of the mind. The only way one can do that is to not try and think about or analyze it; you have to trust in just this simple act of attention, of awareness. It's so simple and so direct that our complicated minds get confused. 'What's he talking about? I've never seen any still point. I've never found a still point in me. When I sit and meditate, there's nothing still about it.' But there's an awareness of that. Even if you think you've never had a still point, or you're a confused, messed-up character who can't meditate, trust in the awareness of that very perception. That's why I encourage you, whatever you think you are, to think it deliberately – really explore the kinds of perceptions you have of yourself, so that they're not just habitually going through your mind and you're either believing them or trying to get rid of them.

The more we try to get rid of our personalities, the more confused we get. If you assume that you've got to get rid of your personality in some way because it's an illusion, then you're caught in another illusion that 'I'm someone who has a personality I've got to get rid of; I'm the personality that's got to get rid of my personality.' It doesn't get anywhere – it's ridiculous. But the practice is not a matter of getting rid of, but of knowing.

Be a personality then. Really intentionally be one; take it to absurdity. That's a lot of fun. Take your personality to where it's totally absurd and listen to it. Your relationship is then not one of identity but of recognizing that you're creating this personality, this changing condition. I can't create any kind of personal perception that lingers, that stays. There's nothing I can create through my mental powers that has any staying power on a personal level. It's all very illusory, very changeable, very ephemeral. However, there is that which can be aware of the personality as a construction. I deliberately think, 'I am a screwed-up person who needs to meditate in order to become enlightened in the future.' I'm deliberately thinking it but I'm also listening to it; I'm investigating it. I have created that perception. I have chosen to think that, and I can hear myself thinking it. *I don't create that which is aware and listens to perceptions.* It's not a creation. I create this perception that 'I am a screwed-up person,' – but not that which is aware of the perception.

You can investigate, and begin to know, the difference between awareness and thinking. What is the still point, the centre, the point that includes thinking? This kind of thinking is reflective. I'm just asking myself this question to bring attention to it. I'm not looking for somebody to give me an answer. But that's a reflective question that clarifies my attention; it helps me to focus, to be aware.

The more I pay attention and am aware, the more I recognize that in this still point there's this resounding sound of silence. I didn't create that. I can't claim the sound of silence is some personal creation of mine, that it belongs to Ajahn Sumedho. It's like trying to claim the air, the space: 'All the space in the world belongs to me,' that kind of ridiculous thing. You can't create a person around it, you can only *be*. There is this sense of *being* this still point, resting, opening to and allowing the personality, the body, the emotional habits and thoughts that arise. Our relationship to them now is one of understanding or embracing rather than identifying.

As soon as we identify with a negative thought, it hooks us. I feel some negative feeling: 'Oh, here I go again, being critical and negative about somebody and I shouldn't do that. I've been a monk all these years and how can I stop doing that? I've lost it.' I've identified with a negative thought and it triggers off all kinds of feelings of despair. Or, 'I shouldn't be like this, I shouldn't think like this. A good monk should love everybody.' With awareness, you suddenly stop that, and you're back in the centre again.

So just recognize, no matter how many times you go out on the wheel, it's just a very simple act of attention to be back in the centre. It's not that difficult, remote or precious; we're simply not used to it. We're used to being on the turning wheel. We're used to going around and around and becoming all kinds of things. We're used to delusions, fantasies, dreams. We're used to extremes. What we're used to we are inclined to do if we're not attentive, if we're not vigilant. Then we easily fall back onto the turning wheel because we're used to that, even though we suffer. When we aren't aware, when we aren't vigilant and attentive, then we easily fall back into the realm of suffering. The good side of it is the more we develop awareness, cultivate awareness, we then start de-programming

those habits. We're not feeding these illusions anymore. We're not believing, we're not following, we're not resisting. We're not making any problem about the body as it is, the memories, the thoughts, the habits or the personality that we have. We're not judging or condemning, praising, adulating or exaggerating anything. It is what it is. As we do that, our identification with the personal condition begins to slip away. We no longer seek identity with our illusions; we've broken through that. When we've seen through that illusion of self, what we think we are, then our inclination is towards this centre point, this *Buddho* position.

This is something you can really trust. That's why I keep saying this, just as a way of encouraging you. If you think about it, you don't trust it. You can get very confused because other people will say other things and you'll hear all kinds of views and opinions about meditation, Buddhism and so on. Within this sangha there are so many monks and nuns, so many views and opinions. It's a matter of learning to trust yourself, the ability to be aware rather than think, 'I'm not good enough to trust myself. I've got to develop the *jhānas* first. I've got to purify my *sīla* first, my ethical conduct. I've got to get rid of my neurotic problems and traumas first before I can meditate.' If you believe that, then it's what you'll have to do. But if you begin to see what you're doing, that very illusion, then you can trust in that simple recognition. It's not even condemning the illusion. It's not saying you shouldn't do those things. I'm not saying you shouldn't purify your *sīla* or resolve your emotional problems, go to therapy or develop the *jhānas*. I'm not making any statement about 'should' or 'shouldn't', but rather I'm pointing to something that you can trust – this awareness, *sati-sampajañña*, here and now.

If one of you should come to me and say, 'Ajahn Sumedho, I'm really screwed up. I was very badly treated when I was a child.

I've got so many neurotic problems and fears. I really need to go to therapy and get these things straightened up in some way because I can't meditate the way I am,' and I say, 'Well, yeah, you should. You're really screwed up! I think you should go to a therapist and straighten yourself out first, then meditate after that.' Would that be very helpful? Would I be pointing to the still point or would I be perpetuating your own self-view? That self-view might even be right on a worldly level – I'm not saying you shouldn't go to a therapist. What's best is to not say you are this way or that way – to not give you some kind of identity to attach to – but to empower or encourage you to trust in your own ability to wake up, to pay attention. I don't know what the result of that will be. I hope it will be good. But what's true is that your true identity isn't dependent upon any condition.

Pointing to the present, the *paccuppanna-dhamma*, we can grasp that idea and then think we don't need to do all those things. 'We don't need to be monks or nuns; we don't need therapy. We can just meditate. Pure meditation will solve all our problems.' Then we grasp that and become anti-religious: 'All religion is a waste of time; it's all a bunch of rubbish. Psychotherapy is a waste of time. You don't need that. All you need to do is be mindful and meditate.' That's another viewpoint. Those kinds of opinions are not pointing to the centre, they're judging the conditions or the conventions. And even though you can say that it is true, that ultimately all you need to do is to wake up – simple as that – that in itself is a convention of language. This empowerment or encouragement is pointing to an immanent act of awakening. It's not telling you that you are some kind of person who is asleep and should wake up, or that you should grasp that idea. It is pointing to that sense of actually *being* awake, aware.

In the Western world we get very complicated because we don't usually have a lot of faith, or *saddhā*. Asian Buddhists tend to be more culturally attuned to this. They have a lot of faith in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha or a teacher. Most of us come to Buddhism or become monks or nuns when we're adults, and we're sceptical. Usually we've gone through a lot of sceptical doubts and have strong self-images, and a hard, strong sense of individuality. Speaking for myself, my personality was a doubting, sceptical one. This doubt, or *vicikicchā*, was one of my greatest obstructions. That's why I couldn't be Christian: it was totally impossible for me to believe in the kinds of doctrines that you have to believe in to be one. I was a sceptical, doubting character. At the age of thirty-two I was quite cynical. I'd been through a lot, and had quite a lot of bitterness about life. I was not pleased with my life at thirty-two. I was disappointed with myself and a lot of others. There was a kind of despair, bitterness and doubt, and yet the faint light at the end of the tunnel was Buddhism. That was one thing I still had some hope for, my interest in Buddhism. It was a sign to me, something that drew me into this life.

The good thing about being highly individualistic, sceptical and doubtful is that you do tend to question everything. One thing I appreciated with Ajahn Chah was that everything was up for questioning. That which is sacred and oftentimes never questioned in religions, was allowed to be questioned. He was never one for a peremptory approach of 'you have to believe in this and you have to believe in that.' There was never that hard, heavy-handed, dictatorial style; it was much more this reflective questioning and inquiry. One of the problems with Westerners is that we're complicated because of the lack of faith. Our identities get complicated in so many ways, and are highly personal; we take

everything personally. Sexual desire and the sexual forces in the body are regarded as very personal. The same is true with how we identify with hunger and thirst. We judge the basic forces that are natural and take them personally, thinking we shouldn't be cowardly and weak, pusillanimous. We get complicated because we judge ourselves endlessly, criticize ourselves according to very high, ideal standards – noble standards we can never live up to. We get self-disparaging, neurotic and depressed because we're not in touch with nature. We've come from the world of ideas rather than from realizing the natural law.

In meditation it's a matter of recognizing the way it is – the Dhamma or the natural law, the way things are – that sexual desire is like *this*, it's not mine. The body is like *this*; it has sexual organs so it's going to have these energies. This is the way it is. It's not personal. I didn't create it. We begin to look at the most obvious things, the basics, the human body, in terms of 'the way it is' rather than identifying with it personally. We investigate the instinctual energies. We have strong survival and procreative instincts: hunger and thirst, the urge to protect ourselves, the need for safety. We all need to feel some kind of physical safety, which is a survival instinct; these are basic to the animal kingdom, not just humans. It gets more complicated because we identify with it, and judge it according to high standards and ideals. Then we become neurotic. It gets all over the place; we can't do anything right. This is the complicated mess that we create in our lives, and it's very confusing.

Now is the time to understand that it needn't be seen in this way. No matter how complicated things are, the practice is very simple. This is where we need a lot of patience, because when we're complicated, we oftentimes lack patience with ourselves. We've got clever minds. We think very quickly and have strong

passions, and it's easy to get lost in all of this. It's confusing for us because we don't have any way out of it, we don't know a way to transcend or to see it in perspective. In pointing to this centre point, to this still point, to the here-and-now, I'm pointing to the way of transcendence or the escape. Not escape by running away out of fear, but by means of the escape hatch that allows us to get perspective on the mess, on the confusion, on the complicated self that we have created and identify with.

It's simple and uncomplicated. But if you start thinking about it, then you can make it very complicated with such thoughts as, 'Oh, I don't know. I don't think I could ever realize nibbāna.' But this is where trust comes in. If you're aware that 'Oh, I don't know' is a perception in the present, trust in that awareness. That's all you need to know. It is what it is. We're not even judging that perception. We're not saying, 'What a stupid perception.' We're not adding anything. The awareness of it, that's what I'm pointing to.

Learn to trust in that awareness rather than in what the perception is saying. The perception might even be common sense in a way, but the attachment to it is where you get lost. 'We should practise meditation. We should not be selfish and we should learn to be more disciplined and more responsible for our lives.' That's very good advice, but if I attach to that, what happens? I go back to thinking, 'I'm not responsible enough, I've got to become more responsible and I shouldn't be selfish. I'm too selfish and I shouldn't be,' and I'm back onto the turning wheel again. One gets intimidated even by the best advice. What to do? Trust in the awareness of it. The thought 'I should be responsible' is seen, and one's relationship to it is no longer that of grasping. Maybe if that thought resonates as something to do, then be more responsible. It's not a matter of denying, blotting out, condemning or believing, but of trusting

in the attitude of attention and awareness rather than endlessly trying to sort it out on the turning wheel with all its complicated thoughts and habits, where you just get dizzy and totally confused.

The still point gives you perspective on the conditions, on the turning wheel, on the confusion, on the mess. It puts you into a relationship to it that is one of knowing it for what it is, rather than making a personal identity out of it. Then you can see that this knowing is your true nature – your real home – this pure state, pure consciousness, pure awareness. You are learning to remember that, to be that. It's what you really are, rather than what you think you are according to the conditioning of your mind.

When You're an Emotional Wreck

RIGHT NOW WE'RE IN A RETREAT SITUATION where we've got everything under control and perfect for what we regard as a proper, formal retreat. In contrast to this, next week there will be a lot of comings and goings, and things happening that we can't control. So, just be aware of expectation, and the view about what a proper, formal retreat should be. Whatever views or opinions you may have, just know the way they are. Whatever kind of irritation, frustration or aversion you might feel – you can use all of that for meditation. The important thing is to maintain the awareness that 'it is the way it is' rather than making attempts to suppress your feelings, ignore, or get upset and angry about things not going the way you want, and then not taking the opportunity to observe the way it is. If one is upset about the way it is, one can use *that* as a part of the meditation.

Unwanted things happen in any retreat. Like the window in the Temple: the electric motor that opens and closes it doesn't work. High-tech! Then the spotlight went out. I notice in my own mind that when things go wrong, things break or things are going in a way that makes me feel frustration or irritation,

then I like to use those situations. If the window doesn't close, and the spotlight doesn't go on, I can feel a certain way. I'm aware of that feeling of not wanting the spotlight or window to be broken, of wanting to get it fixed right away, 'We can just get somebody in to do it during the break so it doesn't interfere with my practice.' But notice in all of this that mindfulness is the important factor, because concentration can get disrupted. However, mindfulness, if you trust it, opens to the flow of life as an experience, with its pleasure and pain.

Sati-sampajañña, awareness, apperception or intuitive awareness: I keep reiterating this so that you can really appreciate the difference between intuitive awareness and thinking and analysis that comes from trying to get something or get rid of something: If you're caught in the thinking process, then you'll end up always with, 'Well, it should be like this and it shouldn't be like that,' and 'This is right and that is wrong.' We can even say, 'The Buddha's teachings are right,' and get attached to that idea! The result of that, if we don't have enough *sati-sampajañña* along with it, is that we become Buddhists who feel we are right because we're following the 'right' teaching. Thus, as a consequence of attachment and the way we perceive the Buddha's teachings, we can become self-righteous Buddhists. We can feel that any other form of Buddhism that doesn't fit into what we consider right is then wrong, or that other religions are wrong. That's the thinking behind self-righteous views – notice how limiting it is. We can be attached to these thoughts and perceptions, or to negative, inferior perceptions of ourselves, and think that's right. Apperception means being aware of perceptions – perceptions of myself or that Buddhism is right ... and they're like *this*. There's still consciousness, awareness, intelligence. It's pure, but it's not 'my purity' as a personal achievement, it's naturally pure.

Notice that this awareness includes the body, the emotions and the intellect. *Sati-sampajañña* includes everything. It's not dismissing the physical condition that we're experiencing; it includes the emotional state and whatever state your body is in, whether it's healthy or sickly, strong or weak, male or female, young or old – whatever. The quality is not the issue; it's not saying how your body should be, but the body is included in this moment. Apperception is the ability to embrace *that which is*, and the body is right now. This is my experience. The body is right here – I can certainly feel it. Awareness includes emotional states, no matter what they are. Whether you're happy or sad, elated or depressed, confused or clear, confident or doubtful, jealous or frightened, greedy or lustful, awareness includes and notices all those in a way that is not critical.

We're not saying, 'You shouldn't have lustful emotions,' or anything like that. We're not making moral judgements, because we're using *sati-sampajañña*. If you get caught up in your brain, your intellect, then it says, 'Oh! You're having lustful thoughts in the shrine room. You shouldn't do that. You're not a very good monk or nun if you do things like that. You're impure!' We're attached to these judgements, this judgemental, critical function we have, but *sati-sampajañña* includes that; it includes the judgement. It doesn't judge judgement; it's noticing the tyrannical, self-righteous superego that says, 'You shouldn't be the way you are. You shouldn't be selfish. You should be compassionate and loving.' 'Buddhism is right.' 'I'm getting nowhere in my practice.' *Sati-sampajañña* embraces that. It's just noticing the way it is. I can listen to my intellect, my superego, emotional states and the body – but with *sati-sampajañña* the attitude is one of 'I know that. I know you.' It's patient with all this. It's not trying to control or make any problem out of it. As we relax and open to these things, we

allow them to change on their own, we give them that opportunity. They have their own kammic force. Our refuge is not in thinking or emotions or the physical body, but in this simple ability to listen, to be attentive to this moment.

I always use the practice of listening to the sound of silence – that subtle, continuous inner ringing tone in the background of experience – because every time I open the mind, that’s what I hear. Its presence contains and embraces the body, the emotional quality and the thinking mind all at once. It’s not like A-B-C or anything in tandem or sequence. Just the way it is, as a whole, it includes. It doesn’t pick and choose, ‘I want this but I don’t want that.’ Noticing, trusting and valuing this ability that each one of us has is something to really treasure and cultivate.

You can reflect on intuition as the point that includes or embraces. In addition to the intuitive ability, we have the thinking ability. The thinking ability excludes, like the single-pointedness you get through concentrating on an object. With a single point for concentration you focus on it in order to exclude distractions. When you’re using intuitive awareness, it includes all that is there. The single point you get through concentration is just a perception. When you take it literally, it means one naturally excludes anything that’s not in that point. That’s the rational, logical way of looking at it. One-pointedness can be seen in terms of the one point that excludes everything, because that’s the logic of thought. Intuition is non-verbal and non-thinking, so the point is everywhere, it includes. This is *sati-sampajañña* and *satipaññā*, or mindful wisdom. You can’t do this through thinking or analysis, or by defining or acquiring all the knowledge in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka* or the

*Analytical presentations of the Buddha’s teachings.

suttas, and so becoming an expert on Buddhism because you might know a lot *about* it. But you won't *know* it. It's like knowing all about honey without tasting it – chemical formulae, different qualities, which one is rated the highest, the best and the sweetest, which one is considered common and vulgar, lower-realm honey – you might know all that but not know the flavour of any of it. You can have pictures and portraits of it, the whole lot. But if you just taste honey, then you are intuitively aware that it tastes like *this*.

Paññā, or wisdom, comes from intuition, not from analysis. You can know all about Buddhism and still not use any wisdom in your life. I like the word combinations *sati-sampajañña* and *satipaññā*.[†] *Sati-sampajañña* is not something that you acquire through studying, or through trying to pursue it by will alone. It is awakening, learning to trust this awakening, paying attention to life. It's an immanent act of trust in the unknown, because you can't get hold of it. People like to ask, 'Define it for me, describe it to me, tell me if I have it.' Nobody can tell you, 'Well, I think you have it, you look like you're mindful right now.' A lot of people who look mindful are not necessarily mindful at all. It's not a matter of someone telling you, or acquiring all the right definitions for the words, but in recognizing and realizing the reality of it and trusting it.

I used to experiment with this because of my background. I spent many years studying in university and was conditioned by wanting to define and understand everything through the intellect. I was always in a state of doubt. The more I tried to figure everything out, I still wasn't certain whether I had got it right or not, because the thinking process has no certainty to it. It's clean and neat and tidy, but it is not liberating in itself. Emotional things

[†]*satipaññā*: wisdom based on mindfulness.

are a bit messy. With emotions you can cry, you can feel sad, you can feel sorry, you can feel angry and jealous and all kinds of messy feelings. But a nice intellectual frame of reference is so pleasurable because it's tidy and neat. It isn't messy, doesn't get sticky, wet and soggy, but it doesn't feel anything either. When you're caught in the intellect, it sucks you away from your feelings. Your emotional life doesn't work anymore, so you suppress it because you're attached to thought, reason and logic. Intellect has its pleasure and its gifts, but also makes you insensitive. Thoughts do not have any sensitive capability. Thoughts are not sensitive conditions.

One of the ideals we talk about is 'all is love', or the concept of universal compassion. But the words themselves have no ability to feel compassion. We might attach to the most beautiful, perfect ideals, but attachment blinds us. We can talk about how we must all love each other, have compassion for all sentient beings, but not be able to do that in any practical way, to feel it or notice it. Then, going into the heart – where oftentimes it's amorphous, where it's not clean, neat and tidy, like the intellect – emotions can be all over the place. The intellect says, 'Oh, emotional things are so messy. You can't trust them,' and feel embarrassed: 'It's embarrassing! I don't want to be considered emotional.' Then someone says, 'Ajahn Sumedho is very emotional.' Whoa – I don't want anyone to think that. So maybe you think of Ajahn Sumedho as mindful, reasonable, intelligent, reasonable, kind. Now, I like that. That's nice. But, 'Ajahn Sumedho is emotional' – it makes me sound like I'm weak and wet, doesn't it? 'Ajahn Sumedho is emotional. He cries, he weeps and he's wet. He's all over the place. Ugh.' Emotions are oftentimes simply ignored or rejected and not appreciated. We don't learn from them, because we're always rejecting or denying them. At least I found this easy to do myself. *Sati-sampajañña* is opening and

being willing to be a mess. Let a mess be a mess; a mess is like *this*. Wet, weak, all over the place, being foolish and silly, stupid; *satisampajañña* embraces all that. It's not passing judgement or trying to control, to pick or choose. It's simply the act of noticing that whatever emotion is present, this is the way it is, it's like *this*.

So the point that includes – notice it's the here-and-now, the *paccuppanna-dhamma*, just switching on this immanent kind of attention. It's a slight shift. It isn't very much, just relaxing and opening to the present, listening, being attentive. It's not going into some kind of real super-duper *samādhi* at all. It's just like *this*. It doesn't seem like much at all. As you relax, trust and rest in it, you find it sustains itself. It's natural, you are not creating it. In this openness, in this one point that includes, you can be aware of emotions that you don't usually bother with, like feeling lonely or sad, or subtleties such as resentment or disappointment. Extreme emotions are quite easy because they force themselves into attention. But as you open, you can be aware of subtle emotions. Not judging this, just embracing it, so that it's not making a problem about the way it is, it's just knowing the way it is. At this moment, the *vedanā-saññā-sankhārā*, the feelings, perceptions and mental formations, are like *this*. *Rūpa*, the body, is like *this*.

Notice what it's like when you open to an emotional feeling or mood without judging it or making any problem out of it. Whether it's an emotional feeling or physical feeling, whatever its quality, you're learning to embrace it, to sustain your attention by holding it without trying to get rid of it, change it or think about it. Just totally accept the mood you're in, the emotional state, or the physical sensations like pain, itching or tension, with this sense of well-being, of embracing. When I do this, I notice the 'changingness'. When you are willing to let something be the way it is, it changes.

Then you begin to recognize or realize non-attachment. In this way, *sati-sampajañña* is not attaching, it's embracing. It's a sense of widening, it includes; it's not picky-choosy. It's not saying, 'I'll pick only the good things; I won't pick the bad ones.' It takes the bad along with the good, the whole thing, the worm and the apple, the snake and the garden. It allows things to be what they are, but it's not approving. It's not saying that you have to love worms and want them in your apples, to like them as much as you like apples. It's not asking you to be silly or ridiculous, but it's encouraging you to allow things to exist, even the things we don't want, because if they exist, that's what they do, they're existing. The whole thing belongs, the good and the bad. *Sati-sampajañña* is our ability to realize that, to know in a direct way, and then the processes take care of themselves. It's not a case of Ajahn Sumedho trying to get his act together, trying to cleanse his mind, free himself from defilements, deal with his immature emotions, straighten out his wrong, crooked views, trying to make himself into a better monk and become enlightened in the future. That doesn't work, I guarantee – I've tried it!

From this perspective you can use *upāya* (skilful means) for particular conditions that come up. One could say, 'Just be mindful of everything.' That's true, that's not wrong. But some things are quite obsessive or threatening to us, so we can develop skilful means with them. I got a lot of encouragement from Ajahn Chah to develop skilful means, and that takes *paññā*. It's using *paññā* to see how I would deal with things, especially difficult emotional states and habits. Don't be afraid to experiment. See what comes up using catharsis, talking it out with somebody who will listen to you, or thinking it out deliberately.

One of my skilful means was listening to my thoughts as if they were neighbours talking on the other side of the fence. I'm

just an innocent bystander listening whilst they carry on these conversations. I'm actually producing all the gossip, opinions and views in my own mind. I'm not involved, not getting interested in the subject matter, but just listening as it goes on and on about what it likes and doesn't like, and what's wrong with this person and what's wrong with that person, and why I like this better than that, and if you want my opinion about this ... I just kept listening to these inner voices, these opinionated, arrogant, conceited, foolish voices that go on. Be aware of that which is aware; notice that. The awareness is my refuge, not the gossiping, not the arrogant voices or opinions and views.

We can learn to help each other by just listening. Learning to listen to somebody is about developing relationship rather than preaching and trying to tell somebody how to practise and what to do. Sometimes all we need to do is learn how to listen to somebody else with our own *sati-sampajañña*, so that they have the opportunity to verbalize their own fears or desires without being condemned or given all kinds of advice. Listening can be a very skilful means. Some kinds of therapy can be considered skilful means that help us deal with problems that are usually emotional, and where we tend to be most blind and undeveloped is in the emotional realm.

Skilful means is learning that you do have the wisdom to do it. If you think that 'I'm not wise enough to do that,' don't believe it. But also don't be afraid to ask for help. It's not that one is better than the other, just trust your own experience of suffering. If you find you obsess a lot, suddenly things will fill your consciousness: memories will come up, certain emotions, foolish thoughts or silly things can pursue you. We can say, 'I don't want to bother with that stupidity, I'm trying to get my *samādhi* and be filled with loving-kindness – do all the right things,' and not see what we are doing. When we think

that, we're trying to make ourselves fit into an image that is unreal. It's imagined, it's an idealized image. The Buddha certainly did not expect that. Whatever way it is for you is the way it is. That's what you learn from, that's where enlightenment is - right there - when you're an emotional wreck.

Suffering Should be Welcomed

ONE OF THE EPITHETS FOR THE BUDDHA that we chant is *lokavidū*, 'knower of the world.' Of course we can see that this is a quality of the Buddha. But something much more practical than chanting the positive qualities of somebody called 'Buddha' is to reflect on what 'the world' is. This entails contemplating or reflecting on life as we experience it, rather than describing how life should be. If we're rationalists, then we have theories about how things should be. But in reflective awareness we're noticing how things are.

When we become aware of the breath, breathing is like *this*. We're not saying you should breathe a certain way, as if there's some standard of breathing that is ideal that we must all strive for. We contemplate the experience of being sensitive. When we begin to notice the fact that this body that we're in – with its eyes, ears, nose and tongue – is sensitive, and that sensitivity is like *this*, then we're looking inward. What is it to be sensitive? We're looking at and noticing what it is to feel, to see, to hear, to smell, to taste or touch, to think, to remember. We can have ideas about being sensitive – 'our' sensitivity – or we can try and make ourselves

insensitive because of seeing it as a weakness. To some people, to be too sensitive is such a sign; but we're not placing any judgement on sensitivity – just noticing that it's like *this*.

As we notice the world that we live in – the environment, *the way it is* – we find that it leads towards recognizing the impermanent nature of our conscious experience, how things arise and cease, begin and end. This is 'knowing the world,' not judging the world according to some standard, but seeing that the world is like *this*; it's sensitive. The world is about birth and death, about meeting and parting, coming and going, good and bad, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, and all the various gradations of experience and qualities that we are subject to in this form. Even though this seems to be an obvious reality when you recognize it, how many people are really aware of the world in terms of experience? We usually interpret it in a personal way. The habitual pattern is to interpret it all in terms of personal limitations, personal feelings or personal ideas. In noticing the world as it is, we're seeing that it is not a personal thing. A person is a creation of the mind to which we are bound if we don't awaken. If we just operate within the emotional conditioning we have, then we see it in terms of, 'This is happening to me,' or 'I am good. I am bad,' and so on.

It's important to recognize and know that the world is the world. It's a very strong experience. Having a human body is a continuous experience of being irritated. Contemplate what consciousness is in such a form as a human body, which is made up from the four elements of earth, water, fire and air. From the time you are born, the moment you're out of your mother's womb, you start screaming. From that moment on, sensitivity, impingement and irritations come through this sensitive form until it dies. So contemplate what birth into this world is; I encourage you to do

this rather than to judge it according to any ideals or ideas that you might have. This is called the state of awakened awareness.

To 'wake up' means to know the world as it is; it's not about judging the world. If we have ideas about how the world should be, then the way it's often seen through our critical mind is that 'it shouldn't be.' When we see how countries should be, governments should be, parents, partners or whatever should be, then we are coming from ideals, usually quite high standards of, 'If everything were perfect ...'. But this realm's perfection doesn't lie in taking conditioned experience to some kind of peak moment. Peak moments are just that; they're wonderful in their way, but they're not sustainable. The flow and movement of our life is around the changingness of the conditioned realm. In this conscious form, that 'changingness' impinges on us; we're involved in it, we're immersed in it.

Notice how irritating it is just to be able to see, hear, taste, smell and touch. There's always something that isn't quite right. It's too cold or too hot, we have a headache or backache; unwanted noises, odours and suchlike impinge or come into contact with this form. As a result, we experience its beauty, its ugliness, pleasure and pain. But even pleasure is irritating when you think about it. We like pleasure, but having a lot of pleasure is also exhausting and irritating. This is not a criticism; it's just noticing that having a human body is like *this*; breathing is like *this*; consciousness is like *this*.

Consider how sensitive we are in relation to words and thoughts. One can say things and upset everybody just through a certain tone of voice. Using certain words can be very distressing. We sometimes remember things of the past that are pleasant or unpleasant; even get neurotic through being totally obsessed in the present with something we shouldn't have done twenty years ago. There may

be the experience of a lot of guilt, remorse or self-aversion because of past mistakes or unskillful acts. We can drop ourselves into real states of depression and despair.

Being born as a human being is a real challenge in terms of how to use this experience of birth, this human experience, this sensitive state that we're living in. Some people think about committing suicide: 'Just get it over with' – it's too hard to bear, too much to stand – a lifetime of this continuous irritation and guilt, remorse, and fear of the unknown. It can be so utterly depressing that we think it's better to kill ourselves. Or, as the Buddha encouraged us, we can wake up to it, learn from it, see it as an opportunity, as a challenge, as something to learn from. We can develop wisdom in terms of the conditions and the experiences we have in this life, which are not guaranteed to always be the best. Many of us have had to experience all kinds of frustrations, disappointments, disillusionments and failures. Of course, if we take that personally, we want to end it all very quickly. But if we put all this in the context of knowing the world as the world, we can take anything. We have incredible abilities to learn from even the most unfair and miserable, painful and nasty conditions. These are not obstructions to enlightenment; the issue is whether we use them to awaken or not.

Some people think that it's good kamma to have an easy ride, to be born with wealthy parents and high status, beautiful appearance, intelligence, an easy life, all the benefits, all the blessings, all the good things. It's good merit, good *pāramī*, or virtuous qualities. But when I look at my own life, incredible challenges have come that have shaken me, have really upset me, disappointed me to the point where I have contemplated suicide: 'I just want to get this over with. I don't want to spend more and

more years in this realm. I can't take it.' But awakening to that, I realized that I'm quite willing to take what life presents and to learn from it. That's the challenge: seeing this as an opportunity that we have as human beings, as conscious beings.

Now, the teachings of the Lord Buddha are pointing to this. They're to awaken you rather than condition you. It's not a matter of trying to grasp them as doctrinal positions to take hold of, but as expedient means to develop and encourage awakened awareness, mindfulness, intuition. Rather than fear sensitivity, really open to it: be fully sensitive rather than endlessly trying to protect yourself from possible pain or misfortune.

Knowing the world as the world is not a resignation in a negative way – 'Oh, you know how the world is!' – as if it's bad, that there's something wrong with it. That's not knowing the world as the world. 'Knowing' is a matter of studying and taking an interest, investigating, examining experience, and really being willing to look at and feel the negative side of experience. It's not about seeking pleasurable experiences but about seeing even your most disappointing ones, your worst failures, as opportunities to learn, as a chance to awaken. That's why in Buddhism, ageing, sickness, disabilities and loss are not seen as things to fear and despise, but as '*devadūtas*'; '*dūta*' means a messenger, '*deva*' is 'angelic' or 'heavenly'. So these *devadūtas* are heavenly messengers sent to warn us; they tap us on the shoulder and say, 'Wake up!'

A Christian asked me once if we had angels in Buddhism. 'We have angels in Christianity – all kinds of white and beautiful beings that play harps. They're radiant, light beings.' I replied, 'Well, Buddhist angels are not that way. They're old age, sickness and death!' But there is a fourth *devadūta*: the *samaṇa*, a monk or nun, the human being who is having spiritual realizations. This always

interested me because I thought it was quite amusing seeing an old person as an angel, the sick, the mentally ill, corpses, or monks and nuns as *devadūtas*. In looking at the shaven heads and the saffron robes, this is seeing people in terms of *devadūtas* rather than monks and nuns, senior and junior and all that. When we do that it gets into personality view or *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. Do we see each other actually helping one another to awaken, or do we see each other as a person? ‘This monk is like this and that nun is like that.’ We can either see it in a worldly way or just change the perspective to seeing others as *devadūtas*.

You can see old people as *devadūtas*. Like me: I’ll be sixty-seven in a few days. Not only will I be a *devadūta* on the level of a *samaṇa*, but an old man too. As I get sick and senile, I’ll be even more of a *devadūta*; and when I’m dead, I’ll be four all in one! Just reflecting in this way we can see how to use life – the malleability of our human mind is endless. We can be so set and conditioned by dualistic thinking, which we get from our cultural background. For example, as a result of coming from a Christian background I was brought up with a dualistic way of looking at everything. Things were absolutely right or wrong, good or evil. These were fixed ways of looking at everything. You had a very limited use of your mind, because it tended to move between these two extremes.

Some of the Buddhist meditation exercises use visualization. For instance, we contemplate the thirty-two parts of the body. I remember when I was first faced with this in Thailand, I kept wanting to think of the thirty-two parts of the body as being physiologically accurate according to Western science. Contemplating my own thirty-two parts, it was easier for me to find a book on anatomy and look at a picture. But to contemplate the reality of those organs, and the conditions existing here and now in this form that I call

myself, the thing I assume to be me, is a different use of learning. It requires us to flex the mind a bit.

I was talking to a monk last week about how difficult it sometimes is to see yourself in terms of positive qualities, because we're so used to seeing ourselves in terms of the negative, what's wrong, what the faults are. I notice especially with Western people, Europeans and Americans, that we spend so much time criticizing ourselves and dwelling on what we feel is wrong with us. Then we think it's even wrong to admit our good qualities. I used to feel I was being honest when I was admitting my weaknesses and faults, but if I admitted my virtues, that would be bragging. Here in Britain, it's very bad taste to brag and tell people how wonderful you are, how much money you make, how many important degrees or titles you have. In Thailand, some monks have name-cards with all their titles on them – BA, MA, PhD, Chao Khun, Head of Province, Vice President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists and World Congress of Buddhists, Trustee to this and that – there it's quite all right to present yourself in terms of your accomplishments. But here we think that's bad taste; it's embarrassing. In an English home you never see people putting their framed university degrees up on the walls. They would be too embarrassed because it's like boasting. There is a sense of modesty here in Britain – which is quite lovely in many ways – but it can be taken to the extreme where you have no way of acknowledging any goodness in yourself or appreciate your own successes, virtues and good qualities.

Are we going to become inflated egotistical monsters if we admit that we love good things? Why did I become a bhikkhu? Why would I choose to live a celibate life in this monastic order? I could give you reasons like, 'I've got to shape up and get my act together. I can't do it any other way. I have to do something in order to make

myself do it.' I can look at it in terms of weakness and inability, that I need the support from external conditions because I can't do it by myself. But I can also look at it in terms of being attracted to what is good, virtuous and beautiful. Both perspectives can have their points to make. I can be fascinated by lower things and the darker side of life. It's not that I'm so good I just gravitate to everything that's light and beautiful; I've certainly had my fascinations for that which isn't. But I would say it's something of a character tendency that my preference leans towards the light and the good, the true and the beautiful. This is the movement that I'm interested in, moving in this direction. I see this as something that's very good in my character, something to respect.

Putting it in terms of personal qualities, it's about learning to be honest, to admit to and make a conscious appreciation of your own humanity and individuality. It helps give you the confidence that you don't have if you're obsessed, over-interested or too committed to being critical and seeing yourself through negative perceptions. This is being able to use our critical mind, our discriminative abilities and our thoughts, not just to analyze and compare one thing with another, but to examine and investigate in terms of experience. We awaken to the breath – it's like *this*. We awaken to the sensitive state we're in – it's like *this*. We awaken to the irritations that we experience as conditions that contact and irritate our senses, and to our own obsessions and emotional habits, whatever they might be, putting them in perspective rather than seeing them as something to get rid of. It's something to awaken to, a change from pushing away, resisting and denying, to moving towards awakening, accepting and welcoming.

In the First Noble Truth, the Buddha proclaimed that there is *dukkha*, suffering. It is put into the context of a Noble Truth rather

than a dismal reality. If we look at it as a dismal reality, what happens? 'Life is suffering, it's all just suffering. You get old, get sick and then die. You have to lose all your friends. "All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me."' That's all it's about; it's just *dukkha* from beginning to end.' There's nothing noble in that. It's pessimistic and depressing seeing it in terms of 'I don't like it. I don't want suffering. What a bad joke; what a lousy joke God played on us creating this mess, and me being born into it. What am I living for, just to get old, get sick and die?' Of course, that's depressing. That's not a Noble Truth. You're creating a problem around the way things are. With a Noble Truth 'there is suffering,' and the advice, the prescription to deal with this suffering, is to welcome it, understand it, open to it, admit it, and begin to notice and accept it. This gives rise to the willingness to embrace and learn from that which we don't like and don't want: the pain, the frustration and the irritation, whether it's physical, mental or emotional.

To understand suffering is to open to it. When we say, 'We understand suffering because it's ...' that is rationalizing it, but that's not understanding. Instead, it's welcoming and embracing the suffering that we are experiencing – our frustration, our despair, our pain, the irritation, the boredom, fears and desires – just welcoming, opening, accepting. Then this is a Noble Truth. Our humanity, then, is being noble; it's an *ariyan* truth. This word *ariya* means 'noble'. What is this English word 'noble'? It's a kind of grand quality; it rises up. If you're noble, you rise up to things. You don't just say, 'Oh, life is misery and I want to hide away from it. I can't bear it.' There's nothing noble in that.

*This phrase appears in more than one of the recollections frequently chanted by our communities.

If you're brought up as Christian, you find yourself blaming suffering on God: 'God, why did you create this mess? It's your fault.' I used to feel furious with God. 'If I were God, I would have created a much better situation than this one.' As a child I remember thinking that if I were God I wouldn't have created pain. You fall down and hurt yourself and you think, 'Why does God allow this? Why did He create a realm where there is so much pain? If I were God and I created the world, I wouldn't have created pain.' Or is pain a Noble Truth? Is old age a Noble Truth? Are loss, separation and all these experiences that we all have in this form, in this human realm, Noble Truths? Are we seeing things in terms of complaining and blaming, or in terms of a Noble Truth? This is what I'm pointing to.

We can look at things in different ways. We can choose. We're not just stuck with one program and being its victim. If the only program we have is from the culture and family we're born into, sometimes it might not be a very good program, and sometimes it's all right. But still, why should we consider ourselves as limited to that experience alone when we have this opportunity to explore, to investigate reality and know in a direct way? Enlightenment is not something remote and impossible. You can see it in terms of some abstract state that you hold up and aim for but don't think you'll ever achieve. If I depended on my personality, I couldn't do anything. I'd never hope to *get* enlightened because my personality can't possibly conceive of myself as a person who could *be* enlightened.

My personality is conditioned to think of myself in terms of what's wrong with me, coming from a competitive society where you are very much aware of who's better and who's worse, who's above and who's below. I can't trust that. My personal habits are conditioned things, they're not flexible in themselves. If you just

attach to or interpret experience through those perceptions and never learn to look at things in any other way, then you're stuck with a limited view, and that can be a depressing way to live your life.

We can begin to wake up and see beyond the rigid, puritanical dualism, or the initial programs we acquire through our family and social background. Trust in your own intuitive awakened sense. Don't trust in your views and opinions about anything – about yourself, about Buddhism or the world – for these views are oftentimes biased. We get biased views about each other: we have racial prejudices, class identities, ethnic biases and feelings of social superiority. These are not to be trusted.

We can look at things in different ways. We don't always have to look at something from the conditioning we have acquired. When the Buddha talks about the Buddha-mind, it's flexible and malleable; it's universal. We can see things in so many different ways. The mind has a radiant quality to it. Consciousness has a radiance; it has a light itself. When we begin to let go of always limiting ourselves through the distortions of our conditioned mental states, then we begin to understand, to see things as they really are, to know the Dhamma – enlightenment. This is not something distant, remote and impossible, unless you want to hold to those views from a personal attitude about them. You can be holding these perceptions so high that they are way beyond your personal ability to achieve them. This is because you haven't awakened to what you're doing. You're merely operating from a conditioned view of everything.

There is *dukkha*, suffering, and *dukkha* should be welcomed. This is my new interpretation. The usual translation is 'dukkha should be understood,' and my new rendering of it is 'dukkha should be welcomed.' Try that one. You can experiment with these different words. You don't have to think, 'Pali scriptures say "understand",

they don't say "welcome". Pali scriptures don't say 'understand'. They use a Pali word that we translate as 'understand'. Maybe we don't understand what 'understand' means. Did you ever think about that? Maybe we don't understand our own language. We're so limited to a particular narrow view of the word 'understand' that we can't really expand it. If we have a broader view, then we can experiment with the words and observe the effect.

So if I say 'welcoming' is the real translation for this, and anyone who goes back to using 'understand' is somehow not right, then that is getting into another rigid, arrogant approach. I'm not interested in proving I'm right, that my translations are the best, but just seeing how they work, what the effect is in the here-and-now. I am sharing this as a way of encouraging you to have that right and freedom to know for yourself. You don't always have to try and fit yourself into views and opinions, even of our tradition with its orthodox forms or definitions, which are our particular group's way of looking at things.

'There is *dukkha*, and *dukkha* should be welcomed. *Dukkha* has been welcomed.' What is that like? Try that one. I don't know if it works for you, but it does for me – because my character tendency is to push *dukkha* away. That's my conditioning, my personality. 'Suffering? Push it away; don't want it.' I see somebody suffering and I don't want to go near them, I want to push away from them. Someone comes to me with a problem – 'Ajahn Sumedho, I've got a problem' – I push away; I don't want a problem. This is my character tendency, to resist. I don't want to know about the suffering. Tell me about the good things. 'How are you today?' 'I'm fine, Ajahn Sumedho. I just love it here at Amaravati. I love being a monk. I adore the Dhamma and the Theravada form and the Vinaya (monastic discipline). I love the whole thing.' Oh,

that makes me feel so good. Tell me more. And I go to somebody else: 'How are you this morning?' 'Ugh! This life is such a dreary, miserable thing. I'm fed up. I want to disrobe.' I don't want to hear that; don't tell me that.

We can go around trying to get people to make us feel good. 'Tell me the good things, because that makes me feel good. Don't tell me the bad stuff, because that makes me feel bad. I don't want to feel bad. I don't want suffering; I don't welcome it, I want to get rid of it. Therefore, I'm going to try and live my life so that I can get as much of the good stuff as I can, and push away the bad stuff.' But in this new translation, 'There's suffering, and suffering should be welcomed,' it changes things. You see the suffering – your own, or others' problems, difficulties and so forth – as things to welcome rather than as things to run from or push away.

We've been on retreat for the past week. I really like formal practice, I like to sit here and face the shrine. I like the Temple; it's a very pleasant place to sit. I sit with this triangular cushion that supports the spine, so I can sit comfortably for long periods of time. I look at the shrine and the mind goes still and quiet, all the things on it bring peace and calm. There are candles and incense and the statue of the Buddha, things that aren't *dukkha* for me. They inspire, they're pleasing, they aren't irritating and they do not cause me unpleasant feelings. If I don't particularly want to look at them, I can just close my eyes and not look at anything. But when I turn around and face you – what happens? It brings up a sense of there being so many possibilities. All these different people, some of whom I don't even know, some others I think I know. I've got views about some of you – you're like this and you're like that. Each person will bring up certain memories, some pleasant, some unpleasant. Some people have different ways

of moving and acting and saying things that bring up different feelings in my mind, in my consciousness. If I think, ‘Oh, I can’t bear this,’ then the world is like that. I have to immediately turn around again and look at the shrine. If, on the other hand, when I’m looking at the shrine I begin to allow the awareness to take me to non-grasping, to the reality of non-attachment – if I really know this, rather than merely depend on the lack of stimulation for it – then instead of having to turn away from the community, I can turn towards the community. Awakened awareness is not dependent on facing the shrine. In this way we’re beginning to awaken to reality rather than to a conditioned experience that we become very dependent upon.

We talk of taking refuge in Sangha. We can define Sangha in terms of the ‘four pairs, the eight kinds of noble beings.’[†] How many of us fit into that description? How many of your egos can think of yourself as *sotāpanna-magga*, *sotāpanna-phala*, *sakadāgāmi-magga*, *sakadāgāmi-phala*, *anāgāmi-magga*, *anāgāmi-phala*, *arahatta-magga*, *arahatta-phala*? Which one are you? How can I take refuge in ‘four pairs and eight kinds of noble beings’? It’s very abstract. Are these sages ideal beings somewhere or are they here, this monk or that nun? What is refuge in Sangha then? Do we want to make it abstract? Is it up to me to decide who’s a *sotāpanna*, *sakadāgāmi* and so forth, to figure out who I can take refuge with? Then it’s

[†]Four pairs, eight kinds of noble beings: the four stages of enlightenment are *sotāpanna* (stream-enterer), *sakadāgāmi* (once-returner), *anāgāmi* (non-returner), arahant (fully enlightened person). The four pairs, eight kinds of noble beings are one realizing the path of stream-entry, one realizing the fruition of stream-entry; one realizing the path of once-returner, one realizing the fruition of once-returner; one realizing the path of non-returner, one realizing the fruition of non-returner; one realizing the path of arahantship, one realizing the fruition of arahantship (an enlightened being).

just a matter of my ego again. Here I am – this person, trying to decide what somebody else is.

It's taking these words like Sangha and making them work for you. Make it practical. We have the same refuge; we're the Sangha. Our refuge is in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, not in personal attitudes or preferences, habits or views and opinions. When we see each other in terms of Sangha or as *devadūtas*, we're looking at each other in a way that begins to appreciate, respect and get beyond personal preference, personal views, personal reactivity. But we're not trying to annihilate any of that, because the *dukkha* we welcome is all this personal reactivity. Like why we feel angry, why we feel jealous, why we feel rejected or suchlike – we're not trying to dismiss it. Instead, as we trust in this awakened state, then we can welcome our own foolish feelings or neurotic habits in terms of a Noble Truth rather than as personal faults.

The Sound of Silence

SOMEBODY REFERRED TO THE SOUND OF SILENCE as a cosmic hum, a scintillating, almost electric background sound. Even though it's going on all the time, we don't generally notice it, but when your mind is open and relaxed you begin to hear it. I found this a very useful reference because in order to hear it, to notice it, you have to be in a relaxed state of awareness. After hearing it described, people try to find it. They go on a ten-day retreat trying to find the sound of silence and then they say, 'I can't hear it, what's wrong with me?' They are trying to find some 'thing'. But it's not a 'thing' you have to find – rather you just open to it: it's the ability to listen with your mind in a receptive state, which makes it possible to hear the sound of silence. You're not trying to solve any problems. You're just listening, putting your mind into a state of receptive awareness. It's an awareness that is willing to receive whatever *is*, and one of the things you begin to recognize within that is the sound of silence.

Some people become averse to the sound of silence. One woman started hearing it and wanted it to stop, so she resisted it.

She said, 'I used to have peaceful meditations. Now all I hear is that blasted sound and I'm trying to stop it. Before I never heard it, now I sit down and immediately I hear zzzz. I don't want that!' She was creating aversion and suffering around the sound of silence, towards the way it is. Rather than creating suffering, the sound of silence can help focus the mind, because when it's aware of it, it's in an expanded state. This state of mind is one that welcomes whatever arises in consciousness. It's not a state where you are excluding anything. The sound of silence is like infinite space because it includes all other sounds, everything. It gives a sense of expansion, unlimitedness, infinity. Other sounds come and go, change and move accordingly, but the sound of silence is like a continuum, a stream.

I was once giving a retreat in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, in a lovely mountain resort with a waterfall and stream. The meditation hall had been built right by the stream, and the sound of the waterfall was continuous and quite loud. Somebody on the retreat became very averse to the sound of the stream, 'I can't meditate here, it's too noisy; the sound of the stream is just too much, I can't bear it.' You can either listen to and open your mind to the sound or resist it – in which case you are fighting and resisting, and that creates suffering. I noticed the sound of the waterfall and the stream. The sound of silence was in the background as well. In fact, the sound of silence became the stronger and more obvious sound, but it did not obliterate the sound of the stream. Likewise, the sound of the stream did not obliterate or cover up the sound of silence; they worked together.

So it's like radar. The mind is in a very wide, expansive state of awareness: inclusive, open and receptive, rather than shut off, closed and controlled. Notice this. Contemplate this experience and

then just concentrate your attention on the sound of silence. Think of it in terms of being like a blessing, grace, or a lovely feeling of being open, rather than as a buzz in the ear, in which case you think that it's tinnitus or some other disease. If you start contemplating it as the sound of angels, a cosmic or primordial sound, blessing every moment as we open to it, we then feel this sense of being blessed. So reflecting on this in a positive way helps us to take an interest in it and get a good feeling from it.

Listening to the sound of silence you can begin to contemplate non-thinking, because when you are just listening to the cosmic sound, there is no thought. It's like *this* – emptiness, no-self. When you're with the cosmic sound alone, there is pure attention, no sense of a person or personality, of me and mine. This points to *anattā*, not-self.

Relax into the sound, don't try to force attention onto it. Just have a sense of relaxing and resting, peacefulness. To sustain listening to the sound of silence, try counting up to ten: 'one, two, three ... nine, ten.' The mind is not used to resting in that way. It's used to thinking and restless mental activities. It takes a while to calm, to relax and to rest in this silence of the mind.

In the silence, you can also be aware of any emotions that arise. It's not an annihilating emptiness, it's not a sterile nothingness, it's full and embracing. You can be aware of the movements of emotions, doubts, memories or feelings that start to become conscious. It embraces them; it's not judging, resisting or even being fascinated with them. It's just recognizing and realizing the way it is.

We tend to use the word 'sound' in terms of how the mind has been perceptually conditioned. We connect sound with the ears. That's why the sound of silence is heard as if it were a buzzing in the ears, because the impression of sound is always connected

with the ears. But you can plug your ears up and still hear it. When you're swimming under water you can still hear it. So what is it?

You start to realize that the sound of silence is everywhere and not just in the ears. The perception of the sound of silence being heard in the ears is the same misperception as thinking that the mind is in the brain. You're changing from that conditioned way of experiencing life, which arises through this sense of self and the culturally conditioned attitudes we hold, to a much wider understanding of the way it is.

It's like the perception of the mind as being in the body. Through intuitive awareness we can see that the body is in the mind. Right now all of you in this hall are in my mind. On the conventional level, for each one of us our mind is in our head – all these different heads with minds in them. But then in terms of mind, I'm sitting here on the high seat; I can see you with my eyes, and you're in the mind – you're not in my head. I can't say you're all in my brain. The mind has no limit to it.

So then one can see that the body is more like a radio, more like a conscious entity in the universe that picks up things. Being born as a separate entity in the universe, we are a point of light, we are a conscious being in a separate form. We tend to assume we are a fixed, solid physical person. But are we something greater than that – not so limited, heavy and fixed as our cultural conditioning makes it sound or as we tend to perceive ourselves?

The sound of silence isn't mine, nor is it in my head, but this form is able to recognize it and know things as they are. This knowing is not a cultural knowing. It's not like interpreting everything from my cultural conditioning. It's seeing things as they are in a direct way, which is not dependent on cultural attitudes. So we really begin to understand *anattā*, which enables us to see that we are all

connected, we are one. We are not as we appear to be, a collection of totally separate entities. If you start contemplating like this, you begin to expand your awareness to include rather than to define.

In terms of meditation, we are establishing awareness in the present; collecting, recollecting, contemplating one-pointedness in the present – the body, the breath, the sound of silence. Then we can bring to this an attitude of *mettā*, loving-kindness, which is a way of recognizing and relating to conditioned phenomena without judging them. Without this attitude we tend to make value judgements about what we experience on a personal level. One person is feeling peaceful, another person is feeling restless, another person is feeling inspired, another person is feeling bored, another person high, another low. Or you're having good or bad thoughts, stupid or useful thoughts – all of which are judgements about the quality of the experience each one of us is having. In terms of knowing, however, we know thought is a condition that is arising and ceasing. Even bad thoughts or horrible thoughts arise and cease, just like good thoughts. It's not a matter of passing judgement about how bad you are because you are having bad thoughts; it's about the ability to recognize thought, and to see that the nature of thought is impermanent, changing, not-self. So just use this cosmic hum, this gentle stream of flowing, scintillating sound. Get familiar with it.

Sometimes with emotional experience we can get wound up about something, and have strong emotional feelings such as being indignant or upset: 'I'm not standing for that; I've had enough.' When that happens, go into the sound of silence, count to five or ten, and see what happens. Experiment with it, right at that moment. 'I'm totally fed up, I've had enough, this is it!' Then go into the silence. I used to like to play with this when I was suffering from

indignation, exasperation and being fed up. I like that expression, 'fed up.' You can say it with such conviction!

This 'cosmic sound', the sound of silence, is a natural sound. When you learn to rest with it, it's sustainable. It's not created by you; it's not like you're creating a refined state that depends on conditions to support it. To sustain any kind of refined state you must have very refined conditions supporting it. You can't have coarse, noisy, raucous, nasty things happening and still sustain a sense of refinement in your mind. To have a refined mental state you must have silence, few demands, no noise, no distractions, no quarrelling, wars, explosions, just a lovely scene where everything is precious and controlled. When we get into that state, we can get very precious. Everybody whispers to each other in gentle tones. Then when somebody says, 'Agh' it shatters us, and we get upset because we have become so sensitive.

With the sound of silence, you begin to hear it wherever you are – in the middle of London or in a traffic jam in Bangkok; in a heated argument with somebody; or when the chainsaw is going – or when the pneumatic drill, the lawn mower and the chainsaw are going at the same time! Even when there is music. So learning to detect and tune into it is a challenge. Sometimes people say, 'I can't hear it, there's too much noise.' If you are resisting the noise you can't hear the sound of silence, but if you open to it then you begin to hear the gentle scintillating hum, even with the pneumatic drill blasting away.

Listening to the sound of silence allows us to integrate mindfulness meditation into movement, work, business. If you are washing dishes, walking from here to your room or driving a car, you are able to listen to the sound of silence at the same time. It's not a distracting thing that makes you heedless; it increases

your mindfulness. It allows you to be fully with what you are doing. When you're walking to your room, you could be thinking about everything else, but using the sound of silence helps you to be with walking, being mindful and with the very action that's happening in the present.

Sometimes the sound of silence will become very loud and quite unpleasant, but it won't stay that way. I remember one time it was incredibly loud, ear-splitting. I thought, 'something's going wrong.' Then it changed and I tried to get it to be loud again and couldn't. It's not something that is dangerous. If you resist it or are negative about it, you're creating that negativity towards it. If you relax and open, then you feel this gently scintillating background sound that is peaceful, calming and restful. You begin to recognize emptiness. Emptiness is not some vague idea that you might experience some day if you practise meditation. It's very direct.

In that emptiness, contemplate what 'self' is. When you become a personality, what happens? You start thinking, grasping your feelings, then you become a monk or nun, man or woman, a personality, Pisces, Aries, an Asian or a European, an American, old man, young woman, or whatever. It's through thinking, grasping at the *khandhas* that we start getting wound up into those things, and then we become something. But in this emptiness there is no nationality. It's a pure intelligence; it doesn't belong to anybody or any group. So then you start recognizing when you've become somebody and nobody, when there is *attā* and *anattā*, self and no-self.

In the emptiness there is no self, no Ajahn Sumedho right now. 'But I want to tell you about my personal history and all my qualifications and my achievements in the holy life over the past thirty-three years. I'm abbot of the monastery, considered a VIB,

Very Important Bhikkhu, and I want you to respect me and treat me properly because you get a lot of merit for being kind to old people. That's Ajahn Sumedho! Or, 'You don't have to respect me at all, it doesn't matter to me in the slightest. I can take it if you don't like me, or if you criticize and find fault with me, it's okay, I'm quite willing to bear it because I've sacrificed a lot for all of you.' But that's Ajahn Sumedho again – born again and then gone. Empty. Just by exploring this you get to understand what *attā* is and how you become a personality. You also see that when there is no person, there is still awareness. It's an intelligent awareness, not an unconscious dull stupidity. It's a bright, clear, intelligent emptiness. When you become a personality through having thoughts like feeling sorry for yourself, views and opinions, self-criticism and so forth, and then they stop – there is the silence. But this silence is bright and clear, intelligent. I prefer this silence rather than the endless, proliferating nattering that goes on in the mind.

I used to have what I call an 'inner tyrant', a bad habit I picked up of always criticizing myself. It's a real tyrant – there is nobody in this world who has been more tyrannical, critical or nasty to me than I have. Even the most critical person, however much they have harmed and made me miserable, has never made me relentlessly miserable as much as I have myself, as a result of this inner tyrant. It's a real wet blanket of a tyrant; no matter what I do it's never good enough. Even if everybody says, 'Ajahn Sumedho, you gave such a wonderful Dhamma talk,' the inner tyrant says, 'You shouldn't have said this, you didn't say that right.' It goes on in an endless perpetual tirade of criticism and fault-finding. Yet it's just habit. I freed my mind from this habit; it doesn't have any footing anymore. I know exactly what it is and no longer believe in it, or even try to get rid of it. I just know not to pursue it, and simply let it dissolve into the silence.

That's a way of breaking a lot of these emotional habits we have that plague us and obsess our minds. You can actually train your mind, not through rejection or denial but through understanding and cultivating this silence. Don't use this silence as a way of annihilating or getting rid of what is arising in experience, but as a way of resolving and liberating your mind from the obsessive thoughts and negative attitudes that can endlessly plague conscious experience.

The End of Suffering is Now

ON A CONVENTIONAL LEVEL we easily conceive the conditions we attach to. With *satipaññā* and *sati-sampajañña* we begin to awaken ourselves to the way it is, rather than being committed to the conventional realities. We're now emphasizing the awareness that's there before we become something. I'm trying to get this point across, so I think it needs to be repeated many times, because even though it looks simple, the mindset is geared to believe in the personality view as our reality. Most of you are committed to yourselves as personalities, and the reality of yourself as a person is very much ingrained.

The term *sakkāya-ditṭhi* can be translated as 'personality view' or 'the ego.' It refers to perceptions we hold in regard to our identity with the five *khandhas* – the body, feelings, perceptions, conceptions and consciousness – as belonging to 'this person.' In investigating this we are not grasping the perception of 'no person' either. We can take the concept of *anattā* and grasp that and say, 'There's no self because the Buddha said there's *anattā*!', but then we're grasping a perception. Grasping a perception of yourself as

a non-self gets to be a bit ridiculous. Grasping perceptions is not the way. Whatever conditions you create, if you grasp them you'll end up in the same place, suffering, as the result. Don't believe me either – this is for you to explore.

Instead of starting with a perception or a conception of anything, the Buddha established a way through awareness, through awakened attention. This is an immanent act in the present. You can grasp the *idea* of awakened attention and repeat that over and over again, but the simple act of paying attention is all that is necessary. There is this attention, *sati-sampajañña*, an intuitive awareness where consciousness is with the present moment – it's *this* way. It's beginning to explore *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* in terms of the perceptions you are attached to and regard as your 'self'. That is why I keep emphasizing deliberately conceiving yourself as a person, with attention, listening, 'I'm an unenlightened person who has come here to Amaravati in order to practise meditation so that I will become an enlightened person in the future.' You can have comments about this, form more perceptions about these perceptions, but that's not the point. This deliberate thinking allows us to listen to ourselves as we think.

When you are caught in the wandering mind, you lose yourself; you just go from one thought to another and get carried away. But deliberate thinking is not like wandering thinking. It's intentional, for you are choosing whatever you are going to think. The important thing is not the thought, or even the quality of the thought, whether it's stupid or intelligent, right or wrong. It's the attention, the ability to listen to the thinking that you are deliberately doing. Being aware of thinking in this way, what happens to me is that before I start thinking, 'I am an unenlightened person,' there is a

space. There is an empty pause before you deliberately think. So notice that. That's just the way it is; there is no perception in that space, but there is attention to it, there is awareness before 'I am an unenlightened person' arises. Thinking about this is not wandering thinking, it's not judging or analyzing, but just noticing it's like *this*. When you deliberately think, you can also use thought to keep pointing to this awareness, noticing the way it is.

With the pronoun 'I' in a sentence such as, 'I am an unenlightened person,' if you listen to it and the words that follow, you will realize that you are creating this consciousness of yourself through the words you are deliberately thinking. That which is aware of your thinking – what is that? Is it a person who is aware? Or is it pure awareness? Is this awareness personal, or does the person arise *in* the awareness? This is exploring, investigating, and by doing so you are getting to notice the way it is, the Dhamma, that there is actually no person who is being aware; it's rather that awareness will include what seems personal.

'I am an unenlightened person who needs to practise meditation in order to become an enlightened person in the future.' With thoughts like this, one assumes I am this body, with this past. I am so many years old, born in such and such a place, I've done all these things and so I have a history to prove that this person exists. I have a passport and a birth certificate, and people even want me to have a website on the Internet! But really there doesn't seem to be any person in the awareness.

I find the more I am aware, my personal past seems totally unimportant and of no interest whatsoever. It doesn't mean anything, actually. It's just a few memories. Yet taking it from the personal view, if I get caught in thinking about myself as a real personality, then suddenly I find my past important. An identity

gives me the sense that I am a person. 'I have a past, I am somebody. I am somebody important; somebody that may not be *terribly* important, but at least I feel connected to something in the past. I have a home, I have a heritage.' Now people talk about losing the sense of their identity because they're refugees, their parents are dead, they're of mixed race, or they don't have any real clear identity of themselves as belonging to something in the past. The sense of a personality depends very much on proving that you are somebody, your education, your race, your accomplishments or lack of accomplishments, whether you are an interesting or uninteresting person, important or unimportant, a Very Important Person or a Very Unimportant Person!

In meditation we are not trying to deny personality. We are not trying to convince ourselves that we are non-people, grasping ideas that 'I have no nationality, I have no sex, I have no class, I have no race, the pure Dhamma is my true identity.' That's still another identity. That's not it. It's not about grasping the concepts of no-self. It's in realizing, in noting through awakened attention the way things really are. In this simple exercise of saying, 'I am an unenlightened person,' this process can be quite deliberate. You can say, 'I am an enlightened person.' You can choose which you would like to be: enlightened or unenlightened! Most of us don't dare to go around saying that we are enlightened, do we? It's safer to go around saying, 'I am an unenlightened person,' because if you say, 'I am an enlightened person,' someone is going to challenge you: 'You don't look very enlightened to me!' Anyway, whichever is fair enough, whether 'I am an unenlightened person' or 'I am an enlightened person'; 'I am an enlightened non-person' or 'I am an unenlightened non-person' – the words are not really important, it's the attention that matters.

I have found this very revealing. When I did this exercise, it became clear what awareness is – *sati-sampajañña*, mindful, apperception. There is awareness, then thinking and perceptions arise. So deliberately thinking ‘I am an unenlightened person’ arises in this awareness. This awareness is not a perception, it’s an apperception; a cognition that includes perception. Perceptions arise and cease. Awareness is not personal, it doesn’t have any Ajahn Sumedho quality to it, it’s not male or female, bhikkhu or siladharā (nun), or anything like that; it has no quality on the conventional, conditioned level. It is like nothing. This awareness – ‘I am an unenlightened person’ – and then nothing. There’s no person. So you are exploring, you are investigating these gaps before ‘I’ and after ‘I’. You say ‘I’ – there’s *sati-sampajañña*, there’s the sound of silence. ‘I am’ arises in this awareness, this consciousness. As you investigate this, you can question.

This awareness is not a creation. ‘I am’ is something I create. What is more real than ‘I am an unenlightened person’ is this awareness, *sati-sampajañña*. Awareness is continuous, it’s what sustains. The sense of yourself as a person can go any which way. As you think about yourself and who you are, who you should be, who you would like to be, who you do not want to be, how good or bad, wonderful or horrible you are – all this whirls around, it goes all over the place. One moment you can feel, ‘I’m a really wonderful person,’ the next moment you can feel, ‘I am an absolutely hopeless, horrible person.’ But if you take refuge in awareness, then whatever you’re thinking doesn’t make much difference. Your refuge is in this ability to rest in awareness, rather than in the gyrations and fluctuations of the self-view, of your *sakkāya-ditthi* habits.

Notice how being a person is really like a yo-yo; it goes up and down all the time. With praise you feel you’re wonderful – then

you're a hopeless case, you're depressed, a victim of circumstances. You win the lottery and you're elated. Then somebody steals all the money and you're suicidal. This is because the personality is like that. It's very dependent. You can be terribly hurt on a personal level. Or you can be exhilarated: people find you just the most wonderful, thrilling, exciting personality and you feel happy.

When I was a young monk, I used to pride myself on how well I kept the Vinaya discipline, that I was really, really good with the Vinaya. I understood it and I was very strict. Then I stayed for a while with another monk on an island called Ko Sichang off the coast of Siraja. Later on, this monk told somebody else that I didn't keep good Vinaya. I wanted to murder him! Even Vinaya can support another form of self-view. As when somebody says, 'Oh, Ajahn Sumedho is exemplary, a top-notch monk!' – that feels wonderful. Then, 'He's a hopeless case, doesn't keep good Vinaya,' – I want to murder him. So then I begin to question, 'Just how good a monk am I?' This is how untrustworthy the self is.

In fact, being a person of any kind is an untrustworthy state to put your refuge in, because we can rise to great altruism and then sink to the most depraved depths in just a second. Even holding the view that 'I am a good monk' is a pretty dodgy refuge. If that's all you know, then when someone says that you are not a very good monk, you're angry, you're hurt, you're offended. However, despite all the fluctuations, *sati-sampajañña* is constant. This is why I see it as a refuge – because it's not dependent on praise and blame, success and failure.

There are different kinds of methods that can be used to learn how to stop the thinking mind. For example, a Zen *koan* or self-inquiry practice like asking 'Who am I?' These are techniques or expedient means that we find in Zen and Advaita Vedanta, and

are used to stop the thinking mind. You begin to notice the pure state of attention, where you are not caught in thinking and the assumptions of a self – where there is pure awareness. That’s when you hear the sound of silence, because your mind is in that state of attention. In pure awareness there’s no self, it’s like *this*. Learn to relax into that, to trust it, but not try and hold on to it. We can even grasp the idea that ‘I’ve got to get the sound of silence and I’ve got to relax into it.’ This is the risky part of any kind of technique or instruction, because it is easy to grasp the idea. *Bhāvanā*, cultivation of the mind, isn’t about grasping ideas or coming from any position. This *paṭipadā*, this practice, is one of recognizing and realizing through awakened awareness, through a direct knowing.

Some people find it frightening when the self starts to break up – because it’s like everything you have regarded as solid and real starts falling apart. I remember years ago, long before I was even a Buddhist, feeling threatened by certain radical ideas that tended to challenge the security of the world I lived in. When it seems somebody is threatening or challenging something that you depend upon for a sense that everything’s all right, you can get angry and even violent – because they are threatening ‘my world, my security, my refuge.’ You can see why conservative people get threatened by foreigners, radical ideas or anything that comes in and challenges the status quo – because that’s the world they are depending on to make them feel secure. When they are threatened they go into panic.

Reading about the horrible earthquake in India recently – a hundred thousand people have been killed. It just happened out of nowhere. Schoolgirls were practising marching on the school grounds for a festive parade, the merchants were placing their range of goods out in their shops – just an average, normal day.

Then suddenly, within five minutes these schoolgirls were all dead, killed from falling masonry. The whole town of twenty-five thousand people was completely demolished within five minutes – out of nowhere. Think what that would do to your mind! It's really frightening to think what a risky realm we live in. When you explore what's going on in this planet, it seems pretty unsafe. It looks solid and we take it for granted, yet last week in Gujarat all of these people were killed. It seems like a solid and safe environment, then suddenly out of nowhere there's an earthquake and the whole lot collapses on top of them. We can recognize, even without earthquakes, how easily we can have a heart attack, a brain haemorrhage, be hit by a car, a plane could crash from the flight path to Luton Airport or whatever. In terms of this conditioned realm that we perceive, create and hold to, it's an unstable, uncertain, undependable and changing condition. That's just the way it is.

The Buddha pointed to the instability and impermanence of conditioned phenomena. This is not just a philosophy that he was expecting us to go along with. We explore and see the nature of the conditioned realm – the physical, the emotional and the mental – in the way we experience it. But your refuge is in this awakened awareness, rather than in trying to find or create a condition that will give us some sense of security. We are not trying to fool ourselves, to create a false sense of security by positive thinking. The refuge is in awakening to reality, because the Unconditioned is reality. This awareness, this awakens, is the gate to the Unconditioned. When we awaken, that is the Unconditioned. The conditions are whatever they are – strong or weak, pleasant or painful, whatever.

'I am an unenlightened person who has to practise meditation hard. I must really work at it, get rid of my defilements and become an enlightened person some time in the future. I hope to attain

stream-entry before I die, but if I don't, I hope that I'll be reborn in a better realm.' Thinking like that, we go on creating more and more complications. People ask me, 'Can we attain stream-entry? Are there any arahants?' This is because we still think of stream-entry and arahantship as a personal quality. We look at somebody and say, 'That monk over there is an arahant.' We think that person is an arahant or stream-enterer. That's just the way the conditioned mind operates. It can't help it, it can't do anything other than that. So you can't trust it; you can't take refuge in your thoughts or your perceptions, but you can take refuge in awareness. That doesn't seem like anything, it's like nothing – but it's everything. All the problems are resolved right there.

Your conditioned mind thinks, 'Awareness is nothing, it doesn't amount to anything. It's not worth anything, you couldn't sell it.' This is where we learn to trust in the ability to awaken, because if you think about it you'll start doubting it all the time. 'Am I really awake? Am I awake enough? Maybe I need to be asleep longer so that I can be awake later on. Maybe if I keep practising with ignorance I'll get so fed up that I'll give it up.' If you start with ignorance, how could you ever end up with wisdom? That doesn't make any sense. It's like hitting your head on a wall and thinking that after a while you might give it up if you haven't damaged your brain. It does feel good when you stop. But instead of looking at it in that way, trust in this simple act of attention. Then explore and have confidence in your ability to use wisdom.

Many of you may think, 'Oh, I don't have any wisdom. I'm nobody. I haven't had any real insight.' So you thoroughly convince yourself you can't do this. That's the way it seems on the personal level. Maybe you don't feel you have anything to offer on that level, but that's another creation. It's the same as 'I am an unenlightened

person.’ Whatever assumptions you have about yourself, no matter how reasonable they might be – whether you think you are the best or the worst – they are still creations in the present. By believing in those creations, by thinking and holding to them, you’re continually creating yourself as some kind of personality.

This awakeness is not a creation. It’s the immanent act of attention in the present. That is why developing this exercise of deliberately thinking ‘I am an unenlightened person’ is a skilful means to notice more carefully and continuously what it’s like to be mindful and aware while you are creating yourself as a person. You get this sense that your self-view is definitely a mental object; it comes and goes. You can’t sustain ‘I am an unenlightened person.’ How do you sustain that one, by thinking it all the time? If you went around saying ‘I am an unenlightened person’ all the time they would send you to a mental hospital. It arises and ceases, but the awareness is sustainable. That awareness is not created, it’s not personal, but it is real.

Recognize the ending, when ‘I am an unenlightened person who has got to practise meditation in order to become an enlightened person some time in the future’ stops. Then there is the ringing silence. There’s awareness. Conditions always arise and cease now, in the present. The cessation is now. The ending of the condition is now. The end of the world is now. The end of self is now. The end of suffering is now. You can see the arising, ‘I am,’ then the ending, and what remains when something has begun and ended is awareness. It’s like *this*. It’s bright, it’s clear, it’s pure, it’s alive. It’s not a trance, not dull, not stupid.

This is an encouragement, an ‘empowerment’ according to modern jargon. Do it! Go for it. Don’t just hang around on the edges thinking, ‘I am an unenlightened person who has to practise

really hard in order to become an enlightened person' and then after a while start grumbling, 'Oh, I need more time,' and go into the usual plans and plots, views and opinions. If you start with ignorance you will end up with suffering. In the teachings on dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) you have '*avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā*.' *Avijjā* is ignorance, and that conditions (*paccayā*) mental formations (*saṅkhārā*), that then affects everything. As a result, you end up with grief, sorrow, despair and anguish: *soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā*. So I'm encouraging you to not start from *avijjā* but from *vijjā*, awareness, from *paññā*, wisdom. Be that wisdom itself rather than a person who isn't wise, trying to become wise. As long as you hold to the view that 'I'm not wise yet, but I hope to become wise,' you'll end up with grief, sorrow, despair and anguish. It's that direct. It's learning to trust in being the wisdom now, being awake.

Even though you may feel inadequate emotionally, doubtful or uncertain, frightened or terrified – these are reactions; emotions are like that. But *be* the awareness of the emotions: emotion is like *this*. Emotionally we are conditioned for ignorance. I am emotionally conditioned to be a person, to be Ajahn Sumedho. Someone says, 'Ajahn Sumedho, you are wonderful!' and the emotions go 'Oh?' Then, 'Ajahn Sumedho, you are a horrible monk with terrible Vinaya!' and the emotions go 'grrrrr'. Emotions are like that. If my security depends on being praised and loved, respected and appreciated, successful and healthy, everything going nicely and everyone living in harmony – the world around me being so utterly sensitive to my needs – then I feel all right when everything seems to be going all right. But then it goes the other way – earthquakes, persecution, abuse, disrobing, blame, criticism – and I think 'Ugh. Life is horrible. I can't stand it any more! I'm so

hurt, so wounded. I've tried so hard and nobody appreciates me, nobody loves me.' That's the emotional dependency of the person; that's personal conditioning.

Awareness includes emotions as mental objects or *ārammaṇā*, rather than subjects. If you don't know this, you tend to identify with your emotions and they become yourself. You become this emotional thing that is terribly upset because the world is not respecting you enough. Our refuge is in the Deathless reality rather than in the transient and unstable conditions. If you trust in awareness, then the self and your emotions – whatever they might be – can be seen in terms of what they are; not judged, not making any problem out of them, but just noticing: it's like *this*.

Don't Take It Personally

WE HAVE JUST THREE WEEKS LEFT of the Vassa (Rains Retreat). The words in this sentence are perceptions of time and change in the conditioned realm. Vassa is a convention. The autumn doesn't say, 'I'm autumn'; we call it autumn. This is a convention we use for communicating our cultural attitudes or moral agreements. Conventions are made up and are dependent on other things. Things that are considered good in one conventional form are not considered appropriate in another. We have various biases or prejudices we get from our culture and the conventions that we have. Just living in Europe we have old biases of what the French are like, and the Germans, Italians and so forth.

We have cultural attitudes as a way of perceiving things. We form various opinions and views. That is why it's easy to have ethnic warfare and racial prejudices, class snobbery and so forth, because we never question the conventions we have adopted. We simply go along with them. We hold various views about our religion, race and culture, and then compare it to somebody else's. On that level we have ideals, of democracy, equality and

all that, but we're still very much influenced by the conventional views we're conditioned by.

It takes quite a determined effort to get beyond your cultural conditioning. Being American, there was a lot that I just assumed. I never realized how arrogant I could be until I had to live in another culture. I never saw how American idealism could be another blind spot, shoving our ideas down people's throats, saying America knows what's good for everybody, how they should run their countries. When you're brought up to think you're in the most advanced society, then that's the assumption. I don't think I was taught this view in any intentional way. It was assumed. It was an underlying attitude.

It's hard to get beyond these assumptions, these things we pick up. We don't even know we have these attachments until they're reflected in some way. That's why living in different cultures helps. Living in Thailand helped me see a lot of these things because the culture was so different. There was the whole attitude that came from living in a Buddhist monastery, where the emphasis was on reflection, mindfulness and wisdom. I wasn't just becoming a kind of ersatz Thai, 'going native' as they say, but was learning to see the subtleties of attitudes and assumptions I was conditioned by, attitudes that may not be easily seen until one finds oneself suffering about something.

One of the problems we have in meditation is compulsiveness. In our society we are brought up to be obsessed and compulsive. When you're coming from ideas and ideals the result is there are so many 'shoulds' in your vocabulary. Idealism has its beauty, so it's not a matter of disregarding it but of recognizing its limitations. This feeling that there is always something we've got to do, that there is something we haven't done we should be doing, that we should be

working harder than we're working, that we should be practising more than we're practising, that we should be more honest than we are, more open, more devout, better-natured and on and on. All of these are true. The 'shoulds' are usually right. If things were perfect, then I would be perfect. Everything would be just perfect. I would be an ideal and my society would be ideal. Amaravati would fit the ideal; we would all be perfect. Then there would be nothing more you should do because you've already reached the top. But that's not the way life is.

An idea is something we create. We take our ideas from what's the best or what's the most beautiful, perfect, fair or just. But the Buddha is pointing to the way life is, its changingness. It doesn't stick at the best, does it? You can't hold on to anything. For instance, you contemplate roses. Sometimes you get a perfect rose just at its peak, absolutely perfect in its form, its colour, its fragrance, but you can't keep it that way. It lasts that way very briefly before it starts going the other way and then you just want to get rid of it, throw it out and get another one.

With mindfulness we're aware of this changingness. In terms of our own experience in meditation, we're aware of how things change, like moods and feelings. When we think of how things 'should be', we get back into ideas again. We then compare ourselves to ideas we have, what good practice is, how many hours a day one should sit in meditation, how one should do this and how one should do that – and on and on like this. We can operate from these ideas, which are often very good. But the problem with this, even if one performs according to all these 'shoulds', is that there is always the feeling that there's something more you should be doing, something that could be better. It goes on endlessly. You never get to the root of the problem. When we reach the end of

this, sometimes we just give up: 'I've had enough of this. To hell with it. I'm going to enjoy life. I'll disrobe and go out and have a good time, eat, drink and make merry until I die.' Because one can only be driven so far. You can't sustain it and you reach a point where it doesn't work anymore.

To listen to 'should' is a fair enough way to think about something. Some people think we shouldn't even think 'should'! To recognize how things affect us, notice feeling that there is something more you think you have to do. An example of this is the story about a recurring dream I used to have when I first went to stay with Ajahn Chah. In 1963 I finished my master's degree in Berkeley. That was a year of compulsive and intense study; I couldn't enjoy anything. Every time I went out and tried to enjoy myself I would think, 'You've got your exam coming. You've got to pass your master's degree.' I'd go to a party and try to relax and this voice would say, 'You shouldn't be here. You've got to take this exam and you're not ready. You're not good enough for it.' So that whole year I couldn't enjoy myself. I just kept driving myself.

After I finished my master's degree I couldn't read a book for about six months. My mind just wouldn't concentrate. Then I went through Peace Corps training in Hawaii, and they wanted me to read all sorts of things. I couldn't. I couldn't even read the instructions. I was overloaded. But that left a kind of intensity, where the way I would approach anything would be either to think, 'I can't do it' and give up, or get into the old compulsive mode.

When I went to stay with Ajahn Chah, I kept having a recurring dream as a result of putting a lot of effort into my practice. In the dream, I'd be going into a coffee shop. I'd sit down, order a cup of coffee and a nice pastry, and then the voice would say, 'You shouldn't be here. You should be studying for the exam.' That

would be the recurring theme for this dream, which I had quite often. I'd ask myself, 'What's it telling me? What could it be?' And then my compulsive mind kept thinking this was a message, 'There's something I'm not doing that I should be doing. I should be practising more. I should be more mindful. I shouldn't be sleeping so much.' I wasn't actually sleeping much at all. I couldn't drive myself any more than I was already doing. I couldn't figure it out. Then one morning after having this dream, I woke up and I had the answer. The answer was: there wasn't any examination!

I realized that I lived my life as if I were always going to be tested, or brought before the authorities and put to the test, and I was never ready or good enough. There was always more. I could study more. I could read more. I could do things more. I shouldn't be lazy, I shouldn't enjoy life because this would be wasting my time, because the exam is coming and I'm not ready for it. It was a whole kind of emotional conditioning I had acquired because the school system in the States is very competitive. You start when you're five years old and you just keep going.

So I had the insight there wasn't any exam, I just thought there was, and I had always lived my life with this attitude that there was going to be a big test I wasn't prepared for. Maybe it was also from my religious background: you're going to be tested when you die, to see whether you've been good enough to go to heaven, and if not you'll go to hell. There's always this sense that you've got to do something. 'I've got too many faults. I've got to get rid of them. I've got to become something that I'm not. The way I am is not good enough.'

When I came into monastic life, I brought this tendency of being driven into how I practised, and I could do it for a while. But then I realized that if I was going to be a monk, that wasn't the purpose

of the life. It wasn't meant to be that way. It was just how I was interpreting monasticism from this compulsive viewpoint. Once I got the answer to the riddle, I stopped having the dream.

One of the first three fetters is *sakkāya-ditṭhi*, personality view. We're not born with a personality view. It's something we acquire after we are born. Of course, when you're brought up in a competitive system you see yourself in comparison with others and with ideals. Your value and worth is very much related to what's considered the best, and who's the best. If you don't fit into the 'best' category, you sometimes see yourself in terms of not being good enough. Even the people who I used to think of as the best didn't think of themselves in that way. Sometimes we think some people are much happier than they are because we project that onto them. We think they are better off than we are.

When the Buddha emphasized mindfulness as the Path, he was pointing to the way things are rather than to the best. At Wat Pah Pong, in the morning they'd have readings from the suttas about what a monk should be, and they were all according to the ideal standard. Wondering how to interpret this, wanting to live up to such high standards gave rise to a feeling of 'can I really do all that?' One can feel discouraged and despairing because one is looking at life in terms of ideals. But the teaching of the Buddha isn't based on ideals but on Dhamma, the way things are.

In *vipassanā*, insight meditation, you're tuning in to impermanence, into tragedy. This isn't a matter of how things should be but of how they are. All conditioned phenomena are impermanent. It's not that one is saying that all conditioned phenomena *should* be impermanent. They are. It's a matter of opening to impermanence. It's not trying to project this idea onto life but of using your intuitive mind to open, to watch, to pay

attention. Then you're aware of the changingness. You're aware of even your own compulsive attitude, 'There's something I've got to do.' You're aware of that compulsive feeling, attitude or belief that 'I'm a person with a lot of faults and weaknesses,' which is easy to believe as being honest and realistic. Then we think that in order to become an enlightened being we've got to get over these, get rid of them in some way and become an arahant. This way of thinking is often what we read into the scriptures. But in terms of reflective awareness, you notice that such a way of thinking is something you've created in your mind: 'I am a person with a lot of faults and weaknesses and I've got to practise hard in order to overcome them.' That's something I'm creating in my mind. I'm creating that attitude. That's not the truth; that's a creation. That which is aware of all this is the awakened state of being. You start to notice the difference between this awareness and what you create by habits based on attachments. One sees this is how the mind works.

In our practice we can use the word *Buddho*, the very name 'Buddha', meaning the 'one who knows.' It's a significant word because it is pointing to a state of attention, of knowing directly, of intuitive awareness, of wisdom. There's no person. If I say, 'I am Buddha,' then that's coming from personality again, identity. Thinking 'I am the Buddha' doesn't work. We have refuge in Buddha: *Buddham saraṇam gacchāmi*. That's a convention too, but it points to a reality that we can begin to trust, which is awareness. The Buddha is *Buddho*, the 'one who knows', that which knows, which is awake and aware. It's awakesness. It's not judgemental or critical. The Buddha is not saying, 'You should be like this and you shouldn't be like that.' *Buddho* is knowing that all conditioned phenomena are like *this*. Whereas if you're brought up in a religion like Christianity, God tells you what you should be. At least this

is the way I was taught: how you should be a good boy and every time you're bad you hurt God's feelings. If I told a lie, God would be very disappointed in me. This is a kind of moral training as a child. It's what your parents think. It's all mixed up with perceptions of parents, and God as a kind of parental figure.

Awakeness is about learning to listen and trust in this most simple state of being. It's not *jhāna* or absorption in anything. It's pure attention. If you trust in this purity, there are no faults in it. It's perfect. There's no impurity. This is where to trust, in this attentiveness to the present. Once you try to find it, then you start going into doubt. Trust it rather than think about it. Just trust in the immanent act of being awake, attentive in this moment. When I do this, my mind relaxes and I hear the sound of silence. There's no self. There is purity. If I start feeling that 'I should be doing something,' then I'm aware of it. I'm aware of the *kamma-vipāka* (the results of actions) of having been through the American education system and driven myself through this incredibly compulsive way of living life. This state of purity is not personal. It's not saying, 'Ajahn Sumedho is pure now.' I'm not talking about it in any kind of personal way. It is not a creation. I'm not creating the purity or an ideal of it and then deluding myself with it. It's beyond that. It is a recognition, a realization.

This is where trusting comes in, because your personality view is not going to trust that purity. Your personality view is going to say, 'There's nothing pure about you. You just had some dirty thoughts. You're feeling pretty upset and angry about something someone said about you. After all these years, you're still filled with impurities.' Personality view is the inner tyrant. It's the victim and the victimizer. As the victim it says, 'Poor me. I'm so impure,' whilst as the accuser it says, 'You're not good enough, you're impure.' It's

both. You can't trust it. Don't take refuge in being a victim or a victimizer. But you can trust in this awakened awareness, and that trust is humbling. It isn't like believing in something. It's learning to relax and *be*. Trust in the ability to simply be here, open and receptive to whatever is happening now. Even if what's happening is nasty – whatever conditions you're experiencing – that's not a problem if you trust in this purity.

With the Vinaya, for example, the personality view even attaches to this idea of trying to keep it pure. 'Is my Vinaya as pure as someone else's?' Then you're just using this convention to increase the sense of personal worth or worthlessness. If you think you're more pure than the rest, then that's arrogance, an attitude of being holier-than-thou. If you think you're impure, then you're going to feel hopeless, that you can't do it. You might even think it's better to go and get drunk or something: just to forget about Vinaya for a while, relax and have a good time – instead of beating yourself up with your ideals of not being pure enough.

Conventions themselves are limited, for their nature is imperfect and changing. Perhaps you expect the convention to be perfect. Then maybe after a while you become critical of the convention because you see flaws in it. It isn't as good as you thought, or some of it doesn't make sense, things like this. But recognize that a convention is like anything else, it is *anicca, dukkha, anattā*, impermanent, unsatisfactory, non-self. Theravada Buddhism is a convention based on morality: doing good and refraining from doing evil with action and speech. It's a way of living where we agree to take responsibility for how we live on this planet, in this society. The convention of Theravada Buddhism, whether you find it all agreeable or not, is a tradition with a lot of power from being so old and ancient, and is still useful. It's still a viable tradition that

works. It's not a matter of it having to be perfect for us to use it, but of learning to use it for awakened awareness.

Then we get into the old Buddhist camps of the Mahayana, Vajrayana and Hinayana. We're considered Hinayana or 'Lesser Vehicle.' We could think that means it's probably not as good. Mahayana is better, says logic. Lesser Vehicle and Greater Vehicle. Then Vajrayana, that's the absolute best. You can't get any better than Vajrayana according to the Tibetans. That's the highest vehicle. Then we start thinking in terms of good, better, best. But all of these are conventions. Whether we call it Mahayana, Hinayana or Vajrayana, they're still just conventions: they're limited, they're imperfect. They're functional, to be used for mindfulness rather than as some kind of attachment or position that one takes.

These different terms can be very divisive. If we attach to Theravada and start looking down on every other form of Buddhism, we think that they're not pure, they're not original. They're 'higher', but they're not original. We can get arrogant because we've got our own way of justifying our convention. But this is all playing with words. If we look at what is going on with the words, we're just creating Mahayana, Vajrayana and Hinayana in our minds. The refuge is in Buddha, not in these *yānas*. The Buddha knows that every thought is changing and not-self. So trust in the simplicity of that because if you don't, then it's going to arouse your old compulsive habits of thinking 'I've got to do more, I've got to develop this, I've got to become a Bodhisattva, I've got to get the higher practice going,' and on and on.

When you're caught in that conventional realm, and that's all you know, then you're easily intimidated and blinded by all the dazzling positions, attitudes and ideas people can throw at you. This is where trusting in awareness is not a matter of having the

best, or feeling that maybe you should have something better than what you have. These are creations of your mind. When you establish what is adequate, it's not based on what is the best but on what is basic for survival and good health.

In Buddhist monasticism, the four requisites – clothing, food, medicine and shelter – are an expression of this. You don't have to have the best food and the best robes and all that, but just what's adequate in terms of survival. Is there any problem in terms of having a place to stay or medicine for sickness? It doesn't have to be the very best. In fact, the standard is often established at the lowest point, like rag robes rather than silk robes. Then there is the standard of living in a place where the Dhamma-Vinaya is respected and taught. These give us a sense of a place where we can live. Material standards aren't placed at the best, but if the Dhamma is taught, the Vinaya is respected and the four requisites are adequate, then that's good enough. So go for it! Go for the practice rather than quibble about the rest. It's better to develop one's awareness rather than going along with one's feelings of criticism or doubt in dealing with the people and the place you are in.

I contemplated this compulsive attitude in myself until I could really see it. It was insidious, not just a one-off insight. It reminded me of how I approached life in general, full of 'shoulds' and feeling there is something I should or shouldn't be doing. Just notice and listen to this, and learn to relax and trust in the refuge. This is very humbling because this attention in the present doesn't seem like anything much, or like it's worth anything. 'Attention in the present, so what? I want something I should be doing. Tell me what to do next. How many hours should I be sitting? How many hours should I be walking? What should I be developing? Should I do more *mettā*?' We want something to do, and feel very ill at ease when

there is nothing to do, nowhere to go. In monastic life we do offer conventions and structures. We have morning and evening *pūjā* – meditation and devotional practices – and fortnightly recitations of the monastic rule and other routines – which gives us a conventional form to use in order to do something. Then there's chanting and alms-round, things that are part of our tradition. This structure is here to help us, along with *sīla* for behaviour.

When people go on self-retreat, they let go of the structure and are left on their own. What happens when you're on your own and nobody knows what you're doing? You don't have to look around to see if the senior monk is watching you. You're left to your own devices. You could sleep all day or you could read novels or go for long walks, or you could really practise hard. There's a whole range of possibilities and it's left up to you to notice what happens when the structure is removed. It's not that one does this in a judgemental way, bringing back the 'shoulds': 'I should practise so many hours a day, sit so many hours, walk so many hours and do this and do that, get my *samādhi* together, really get somewhere in my practice.' Not that that's wrong, but it may be very compulsive. If you don't live up to it, then what do you feel like? Do you feel guilt-ridden if you don't do what you've determined to do? Notice how the mind works and awaken to it.

It's easy if there is a strong leader who tells you to do this and do that, everybody come, everybody leave, and everybody marches in step and so forth. This is good training also. But it also brings up resistance and rebellion in some people who don't like it. Other people love it because they don't know what to do. If nobody's telling them what to do next, they don't know how to operate. They like the security of everything being controlled and held together by a strong leader. But recognize

that monastic life is for the liberation of the heart. Some strong leaders kind of browbeat you, or manipulate you emotionally by saying, 'If you want to please me, you will do this. If you really want my approval ... I won't give you my approval if you don't behave properly,' and things like this. I can use my emotional power to try to control and manipulate the situation, but that's not something skilful. That's not what we're here for. The onus is on each one of us. It's about waking up.

Don't think you have to wake up because Ajahn Sumedho says so. Waking up is just a simple, immanent act of attention: open, relaxed listening, being here and now. It's learning to recognize that, to appreciate that more and more and to trust it. What we're trying to do here is to offer a situation where you are encouraged to trust and to cultivate this. When we say 'cultivate', it's not like having to do anything. It's more like learning to relax and trust in being with the flow of life. Because life is like *this*. Life changes. You can see this in the past year here at Amaravati, with the construction and the opening of the Temple and all the ambience around that. Now that period is over. It has changed. It's like *this*.

I remember when I first went to Wat Pah Pong, there was such an *esprit de corps*. We were there with Ajahn Chah. There were only twenty-two monks, and we were really getting somewhere, a crack troop, top grade, top guns. Then a few years later I began seeing things I didn't like and got very critical of it, thinking it was all falling apart. Then I saw it fall apart, after Ajahn Chah had his stroke. I remember going to Wat Pah Pong a few years after that. They had an inner monastery where the monks lived, and then the outer part where there was a special *kuṭi* for Ajahn Chah, which allowed for nursing care. In addition to this they had an outer *sālā* or reception hall, where people came to visit.

People would go to the outer *sālā*; nobody wanted to come to the rest of the monastery. All they wanted to do was to see Ajahn Chah, who was ill and couldn't talk or do anything. All the emphasis was on his *kuṭi*, and no monks wanted to live at the monastery. I remember going there when there were only three monks in a huge monastery, Ajahn Liem and few others, and the place was looking pretty shabby. Usually it was spick and span, clean. The standards of order were very high there, sweeping the paths and repairing everything. But suddenly it was like a ghost town with all these empty *kuṭis* that needed repairing and were dirty and dusty, and the paths not swept and so forth. I remember some people from Bangkok coming to me and saying, 'Aah, this place isn't good any more. We want you to come back and be the abbot.' They were thinking I should go back and take over because it had changed in a way they felt it shouldn't have. But now it's back to having fifty monks and operating at full capacity. Things change.

Now we open up to change. We're not demanding it change in any way that we want it to, or that when it's at its peak we can keep it that way. It's impossible. Even in yourself, you can be aware when you're at your best or your worst, when you're feeling really good and inspired, and when you're feeling down, despairing, lonely, depressed and disheartened. This awareness is your refuge. Awareness of the changingness of feelings, of attitudes, of moods, of material and emotional change. Stay with that, because it's a refuge that is indestructible. It's not something that changes. It's a refuge you can trust in. This refuge is not something you create. It's not a creation. It's not an ideal. It's practical and very simple but easily overlooked or not noticed. When you're mindful, you're beginning to notice: it's like *this*.

When I remind myself with this awareness, this moment is pure. I really make a note of this: this is the Path, this is purity. It's not anything I'm creating but it's just this state of attention. Not attention like 'Attention!' as a military command, it's a relaxed attention. Listening, open, receptive. When you relax into that, it's a natural state. It's not a created state. It's not dependent on conditions making it that way. It's just that we forget it all the time and get thrown back into the old habits. With mindfulness we're remembering it more, trusting it more, and cultivating this way of bringing ourselves back into this awareness. Then we get carried away again ... and come back again. We keep doing that. No matter how recalcitrant, difficult or wild the emotions or thoughts may be, it's all right. This is the refuge.

We can apply this awareness to everything, such as being personally wounded. When somebody says something hurtful, ask the question, 'What is it that gets hurt?' If somebody insults or abuses me in some way and I feel hurt or misunderstood, offended, annoyed or even angry, what is it that gets angry, annoyed, offended? Is that my refuge – that personality whose feelings get hurt and upset? If I have awareness as a refuge, this never gets upset by anything. But as a person, I can be easily upset, because the personality, the *sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi*, is like that. It's based on me being worthwhile or worthy, being appreciated or not appreciated, being understood properly or misunderstood, being respected or not respected, and all these kinds of things.

My personality is wide open to be hurt, to be offended, to be upset by anything. But personality is not my refuge. It's not what I would advise as being a refuge – if your personality is anything like mine. I wouldn't for a minute want to recommend anyone taking refuge in my personality! But in awareness, yes. Because awareness

is pure. If you trust it more and more, even if you're feeling hurt and upset, disrespected and unloved and unappreciated – awareness knows that as being *anicca*. It's not judging. It's not making any problems. It's fully accepting the feeling that 'nobody loves me, everybody hates me' as a feeling. And it goes away naturally. It drops away because its nature is change.

Consciousness

CONSCIOUSNESS IS A SUBJECT that has become quite important these days. We are all experiencing consciousness; we want to understand it and define it. Some people say they equate consciousness with thinking or memory. I have heard scientists and psychologists say animals don't have consciousness, because they don't think or remember. This seems ridiculous. But in terms of this moment, right now, *this* is consciousness. We are just listening – pure consciousness before you start thinking. Just make a note of this: consciousness is like *this*. I am listening, I am with this present moment, being present, being here now. I'm taking the word consciousness and making a mental note: 'consciousness is like *this*.' It's where thought, feeling and emotion arise. When we are unconscious we don't feel, we don't think. Consciousness, then, is like the field that allows thought, memory, emotion and feeling to appear and disappear.

Consciousness is not personal. For something to become personal you have to make a claim to it: 'I am a conscious person.' But there's just awareness, this entrance into noting the present,

and at this moment consciousness is like *this*. Then one can notice the sound of silence, the sense of sustaining, being able to rest in a natural state of consciousness that is non-personal and non-attached. Noting this is like informing or educating oneself to the way it is. When we are born, consciousness within this separate form starts operating. A newborn baby is conscious, yet it doesn't have a concept of itself being male or female or anything like that. Those are conditions we acquire after birth.

This is a conscious realm. We might think of a universal consciousness, and consciousness as it is used in the five *khandhas*: *rūpa* (form), *vedanā* (feeling), *saññā* (perception), *saṅkhārā* (mental formations), and *viññāṇa* (sense-consciousness). But there is also this consciousness which is unattached, unlimited, Deathless. In two places in the Tipiṭaka, there is reference to *viññāṇam anidassanam anantaṃ sabbato pabham* – a mouthful of words that point to this state of natural consciousness, this reality.* For myself, I find it very useful to clearly note: 'Consciousness is like *this*.' If I start thinking about it, then I want to define it: 'Is there an immortal consciousness?' Or we want to make it into a metaphysical doctrine or just deny it, saying, 'Consciousness is *anicca, dukkha, anattā*.' We want to pin it down or define it either as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self, or raise it up as something we hold to as a metaphysical position. But we are not interested in proclaiming metaphysical doctrines, or in limiting ourselves to an interpretation that we may have acquired through this tradition. Instead, we are trying to explore consciousness in terms of experience. This is Ajahn Chah's *pen paccattam* – that is, 'something that you realize for yourself.' What I am saying now is an exploration. I'm not trying to convince you or convert you to 'my viewpoint.'

*'trackless consciousness, without an end, all-radiant.'

Consciousness is like *this*. Right now there is definitely consciousness. There is alertness and awareness. Then conditions arise and cease. If you sustain and rest in consciousness, unattached, not trying to do anything, find anything or become anything, but just relax and trust, then things arise. Suddenly you may be aware of a physical feeling, a memory or an emotion. That memory or sensation becomes conscious, then it ceases. Consciousness is like a vehicle; it's the way things are.

Is consciousness something to do with the brain? We tend to think of it as some kind of mental state that depends on the brain. The attitude of Western scientists is that consciousness is in the brain. But the more you explore it with *sati-sampajañña*, you see that the brain, the nervous system, the whole psychophysical formation arises in this consciousness; it is imbued with this consciousness. That is why we can be aware of the body and reflect on the four postures – sitting, standing, walking and lying down. Being aware of sitting as it is being experienced now, you are not limited to something that is in the brain, but the body is *in* consciousness. You are aware of the whole body in the experience of sitting.

This consciousness is not personal. It's not consciousness in my head and then consciousness in your head. Each of us has our own conscious experience going on. But is this consciousness the thing that unites us? Is it our 'oneness'? I'm just questioning; there are different ways of looking at it. When we let go of the differences – 'I am Ajahn Sumedho and you are this person' – when we let go of these identities and attachments, then consciousness is still functioning. It's pure. It has no quality of being personal, and no condition of being male or female. You can't put a quality into it. It's like *this*.

When we begin to recognize that which binds us together, that our common ground is consciousness, then we see this is universal. When we spread *mettā* to a billion Chinese over in China, maybe it's not just sentimentality and nice thoughts, maybe there is power there. I don't know myself; I am questioning. I am not going to limit myself to a particular viewpoint that has been conditioned by my cultural background, because most of that is pretty flawed anyway. I do not find my cultural conditioning very dependable.

Sometimes Theravada Buddhism can come across as annihilationism. You get into this 'no soul, no God, no self' fixation, this attachment to a view. Or are the Buddha's teachings there to be investigated and explored? We are not trying to confirm somebody's view about the Pali Canon, but rather we use the Pali Canon to explore our own experience. It's a different way of looking at it. If we investigate this a lot, we begin to see the difference between pure consciousness and when self arises. It's not hazy or fuzzy, 'Is there self now?' It's a clear knowing.

So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires, and the whole world arises around 'Ajahn Sumedho.' It takes off into orbit – my views, my feelings and my opinions. I can get caught into that world, that view of 'me' that arises in consciousness. But if I know that, then my refuge is no longer in being a person, I'm not taking refuge in being a personality or my views and opinions. Then I can let go; the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends. When the world ends, what remains is the *anidassana viññāṇa* – this primal, non-discriminative consciousness. It's still operating. It doesn't mean Ajahn Sumedho dies and the world ends, or that I'm unconscious.

Talking about the end of the world, I remember somebody getting very frightened by this, saying, 'Buddhists are just

practising meditation to see the end of the world. They really want to destroy the world. They hate the world and they want to see it end' – this kind of panic reaction. To us the world is seen in physical terms – this planet, the world of continents and oceans, North Pole and South Pole. But in Buddha-Dhamma, the 'world' is the world we create in consciousness. That's why we can be living in different worlds. The world of Ajahn Sumedho is not going to be the same as the world you create, but that world arises and ceases. That which is aware of the world arising and ceasing transcends the world. It's *lokuttara*, transcendent, rather than *lokiya*, worldly.

When we are born into physical birth, we have consciousness within a separate form. This point of consciousness starts operating, and then we acquire the sense of ourselves through our mothers and fathers and cultural background. We acquire different values or sense of ourself as a person that's based on *avijjā* – not on Dhamma – based on views, opinions and preferences that cultures have. That's why there can be endless problems around different cultural attitudes. As with living in a multicultural community like this, it's easy to misunderstand each other because we're conditioned in different ways of looking at ourselves and the world around us. But remember that cultural conditioning comes out of *avijjā*, ignorance of Dhamma. So what we are doing now is informing consciousness with *paññā* – which is a universal wisdom rather than some cultural philosophy.

Buddha-Dhamma, when you look at it, is not a cultural teaching. It's not about Indian culture or civilization. It's about the natural laws we live with, the arising and ceasing of phenomena. Dhamma teachings are pointing to the way things are – things that aren't bound by cultural limitations. We talk about *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. That's not Indian philosophy or culture; these are things to be

realized. You are not operating from some basic belief system that's cultural. The Buddha's emphasis is on waking up, on paying attention rather than on grasping some doctrinal position. This is why many of us can relate to it, because we're not trying to become Indians or convert to some religious doctrine that came out of India.

The Buddha awakened to the way it is, to the natural law. So when we are exploring consciousness, these teachings like the five *khandhas* are skilful or expedient means in order to explore and examine our experience. They are not, 'You have got to believe in the five *khandhas* and believe that there is no self. You cannot believe in God any more. To be a Buddhist you have to believe that there is no God.' There are Buddhists who do have this mentality. They want to make doctrinal positions about being Buddhist. To me that teaching is not based on a doctrine, but on this encouragement to awaken. You are starting from here and now, from awakened attention rather than from trying to prove that the Buddha actually lived. Somebody might say, 'Maybe there was never any Buddha; maybe it was just a myth,' but it doesn't matter because we don't need to prove that Gotama Buddha actually lived; that's not the issue. We are not trying to prove historical facts, but to recognize that what we are actually experiencing now is like *this*.

When we allow ourselves just to rest in conscious awareness, this is a natural state; it's not created. It's not a refined conditioning that we are after, where we are moving from coarser conditions to increasingly more refined ones, where we experience a bliss and tranquillity that comes from refining conscious experience. That is very dependent. This world, this conscious realm that we are a part of, includes the coarse and the refined.

This is not a refined realm that we are experiencing. In terms of human or planetary life, this is not a *devaloka* or *brahmaloka*, those

divine or highest celestial realms which are more refined. This is a coarse realm where we run the gamut from that which is coarse to that which is refined. We have got to deal with the realities of a physical body, which is quite a coarse condition. In *deva* realms they do not have physical bodies, they have ethereal ones. We would all like to have ethereal bodies, made out of ether rather than all these slimy things that go on inside our bodies – bones, pus and blood, all of these yucky conditions that we have to live with. To defecate every day – *devatās* don't have to do things like that. Sometimes we like to create the illusion that we are *devatās*. We don't like these functions; we like privacy. We don't want people to notice, because the physical conditions that we are living with are actually pretty coarse. But consciousness includes all that, all the gradations from the coarse to the most refined.

Another thing to notice is compulsive feelings of having to do something, having to get something that you don't have, having to attain something or get rid of your defilements. When you're trusting in 'your real home', then you can have perspective on this conditioning of the emotions. For example, we come from competitive goal-oriented societies, so we're very much programmed to always feel that there is something that we have got to do. That we're always lacking something and we have got to find out what it is, and we've got to get it. Or that we have got to get rid of our weaknesses, faults and bad habits. Notice that this attitude is just something that arises and ceases. It's the competitive world, the world of a self.

We can always see ourselves in terms of what's wrong with us as a person. As a person there are always so many flaws and inadequacies. There is no perfect personality that I have ever noticed. Personality is all over the place; some of it is all right and

some of it is really wacky. There is no personality you can take refuge in. You are never going to make yourself into a perfect personality. So when you are judging yourself on a personal level, there seem to be so many problems, inadequacies, flaws and weaknesses. Maybe you are comparing yourself to some ideal person, some unselfish and superlative personality. That which is aware of personality is not personal. You can be aware of the personality as a mental object. The conditions for personality arise and cease. Suddenly you can find yourself feeling very insecure or acting very childish because the conditions for that personality have arisen.

When my parents were alive I went to stay with them for about three weeks, because they were really sick. I was abbot of Amaravati, a fifty-five-year-old Ajahn Sumedho going home and living in the same little house with my mother and father. It brought up all kinds of childish emotions, because the conditions were there for that. We were all born through our parents, and our memories and connections are from infancy onwards. A lot of the conditions that arise in families are conditions for feeling like a child again – even when you’re a fifty-five-year-old Buddhist monk and abbot of a monastery! My mother and father would easily go back to seeing me as a child. Rationally they could see, ‘He’s a middle-aged man,’ but they would still sometimes act like I was their child. Then I would feel this rebelliousness and adolescent kind of resentment about being treated like a child. So don’t be surprised at some of the emotional states that arise. Throughout your life, as you get old, kamma ripens and then these conditions appear in consciousness. Don’t despair if you find yourself feeling very childish at fifty years old. Just be aware of that for what it is. It is what it is. The conditions for that particular emotion are present, so then it becomes conscious. Your refuge is in this

awareness rather than in trying to make yourself into an ideal man or woman – mature, responsible, capable, successful, ‘normal’ and all the rest – these are the ideals.

Here at Amaravati I am not looked at as a child. I’m the oldest person here! You may see me in terms of a father figure, because an old man like me brings out the sense of authority. I’m an authority figure, a patriarch, a father figure, a male figure – a grandfatherly figure to some of you. It’s interesting to see this state when the conditions are there. Rationally you can say, ‘He’s not my father,’ but emotionally you may feel like that, acting towards me like I’m a father. It’s an emotional habit. When the conditions for that kind of male authority figure are present, then this is what you are feeling, it’s like *this*. There’s nothing wrong with it, just notice it’s the way it is. Trust your refuge in this awareness, not in some idea that you shouldn’t project fatherly images onto me, or that you shouldn’t feel disempowered by a male authority figure and things like this. If you feel disempowered by me, then simply recognize it as a condition that has arisen, rather than blaming me or blaming yourself, because then you are back into the world you are creating – your personal world – and believing in that as your reality.

I used to get really angry when women would get bossy. When any woman would show any kind of bossiness, I would feel rage. I wondered why even a tone of voice would make me so upset, why I could get so enraged over a bossy attitude. I could see it was like when I was a boy, trying to get my way against my mother. If that has not yet been fully resolved, if the conditions for that rage are present, then this is what will arise. It’s through awareness of it that you resolve it. As you understand it and see it in terms of what it is, then you can resolve it or let it go, so that you are not just stuck with the same old reactions all the time.

Our refuge is in this awareness, rather than in trying to sustain refined experiences in consciousness as our refuge, because you can't do that. Maybe you can learn to increase your experience of refinement through developing skilful means, but inevitably you have to allow the coarse to manifest, to be a part of your conscious experience. Resting in this conscious awareness is referred to as 'coming home' or 'our real home.' It's a place to rest, a home. The idea of a home is a place where you belong. You are no longer a foreigner or an alien. You begin to recognize this through a sense of relief, of just being home at last, of not being a stranger, a wanderer out in the wilderness. Then the world of Ajahn Sumedho arises and it's like I'm not at home anymore, because Ajahn Sumedho is an alien, a stranger. He never feels quite at home anywhere. Am I American now? Am I British or am I Thai? Where do I feel at home as Ajahn Sumedho? I don't even know what nationality I am anymore, or where I feel most at home. I feel more at home here than in America because I've lived here for so long. In Thailand I feel at home because it's a paradise for Buddhist monks and they treat you so well, but still you have to get visas and you're always a *phra farang*. Here in England, no matter how many years I have lived here, to most people I am still an American. But when I go back to America I don't know what I am; people say: 'You don't look like an American anymore. You've got a funny accent, we don't know where you are from!' That's the world that is created. When all that drops away, what's left is our real home.

Trusting in Simplicity

I SPEAK ABOUT THE ATTITUDE OF CONVIVIALITY to encourage you to see the holy life as something beautiful and enjoyable, and to open to it rather than just shut down in order to ‘get on with my practice.’ Conviviality is goodwill, happiness, brightness, welcoming, opening. When I’m convivial, I’m open. When I’m in a bad mood then I’m not open: ‘Leave me alone, don’t bother me!’ Sometimes we see meditation as a way of shutting ourselves off from things rather than opening. Remember, whatever is said is limited, so when we say ‘shut down’ these are only words which convey some meaning to you in whatever way you grasp them.

In any religious tradition there is a lot of confusion because what is said at times seems to be contradictory. At one moment you are being told to shut down, close your eyes, concentrate your mind on the breath, then told to open up with *mettā* for all sentient beings. This is just to point out the limitation of words and conventions. When we grasp these conventions we tend to bind ourselves to a particular view. We might even be encouraged to do this by teachers, or by the way we interpret the scriptures. But remember

to bring it back to the awareness that each of us experiences, which is the centre of the universe.

When you see yourself in personal terms as someone who needs to get or get rid of something, you limit yourself to being someone who has to get something you don't yet have or get rid of something you shouldn't have. So we reflect on this and learn to be the witness, *Buddho* – that which is awake and aware, which listens to and knows personality views and emotional states without taking them personally. We're being the witness rather than operating from the position that 'I'm meditating' or that 'I must get something that I don't yet have. I've got to attain certain states of concentration in order to get to yet more advanced meditation practices.' It's not that this belief is wrong, but it limits you to always being someone who has to get or attain something. Alternatively, you go into the purification mode: 'I'm a sinner and I need to purify myself. I've got to get rid of bad thoughts and habits, childish emotions, greed, hatred, delusion, desire.' You're assuming that you *are* somebody who has these negative qualities. That's why this awareness, this awakeness, is the essence of Buddhist teaching. *Buddho* simply means awakened awareness.

What I encourage is a moving towards simplicity, rather than complexity. We're already complicated personalities. Our cultural and social conditioning is usually very complicated. We're educated and literate, which means that we know a lot and have a great deal of experience. This means that we are no longer simple. We've lost the simplicity we had as children and have become rather complicated characters. The monastic form is a move towards simplicity. At times it may look complicated, but the whole thrust of the Dhamma-Vinaya is towards simplifying everything rather than complicating it.

What is most simple is to wake up. Buddha means ‘awake’, it’s as simple as that. The most profound teaching is the phrase ‘wake up.’ Hearing this, one then asks, ‘What am I supposed to do next?’ We complicate it again because we’re not used to being really awake and fully present. We’re used to thinking about things and analyzing, trying to get something or get rid of something, achieving and attaining. In the scriptures there are occasions where a person is enlightened just by a word or by something very simple.

One tends to think that people in the past had more *pāramī*, more ability than us to awaken and be fully liberated. We see ourselves through complicated memories and perceptions. My personality is very complicated. It has likes and dislikes; it feels happy and sad. It is so changeable that it can alter in just the snap of a finger. My emotions can be triggered off into anger in a moment simply by somebody saying something that irritates me. When certain conditions arise then the consequent state comes to be: anger, happiness, elation and so on. But with *sati-sampajañña* we’re learning to sustain an awareness that transcends these emotions. If we couldn’t do this then there would be no hope, no point in even trying to be Buddhist monks or nuns, or anything else at all. We’d just be helpless victims of our habits, and no way out of being trapped in the repetitive patterns would be possible. The way out is awakesness, attention.

How we hold meditation, Theravada Buddhism, or whatever convention it might be we are using, shows how easy it is to have strong views. People have very strong views, and when they hold to any religious convention they tend to form strong opinions around it. In Theravada circles you have strong views such as: ‘We’re the original teaching, the pure teaching; you’ve got to do this in order to get that; *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna* are the polar opposites.’ These

are just some of the viewpoints and ideas we get from holding to a tradition. But in awakened consciousness there's no convention. Instead, such consciousness perceives phenomena in terms of Dhamma – the natural way. It's not created or dependent upon conditions supporting it. If you hold to a view, then you are bound and limited by that very thing you are grasping.

In awakened awareness there's no grasping. It's a simple, immanent act of being here, being patient. It takes trust, especially trusting in yourself. No one can make you do it, or magically do it for you. Trusting this moment is therefore very important. I am by nature a questioner, a doubter or sceptic. I don't believe easily. I tend to disbelieve and I'm suspicious of things. This is an unpleasant condition to live with, because I would love to believe in something, to rest in a belief that I am fully committed to.

In contrast, the sceptical approach is a real challenge. One has to use it to learn to trust, not in any view, opinion or doctrine but in the simple ability that each of us has to be aware. Awareness includes concentration. When you do concentration practices or put your attention on one thing, you shut out everything else. With *samatha* practice one chooses an object and then sustains and holds one's attention on it. With awareness, it's broad like a floodlight. It's wide open and includes everything, whatever it may be.

Learning to trust in this awareness is an act of faith, but it is also very much aligned with wisdom. It's something you have to experiment with to get a feeling for. No matter how well I might describe or expound on this particular subject, it is still something you have to know for yourself. Doubt is one of your main problems, because you don't trust yourselves. Many of you strongly believe you are defined by the limitations of your past, your memories, your personality; you're thoroughly convinced, but you can't trust that.

I can't trust my personality; it will say anything! Nor can I trust my emotions; they flicker around and change constantly. Depending on whether the sun's out or if it is raining, or if things are going well or falling apart, my emotions react accordingly. What I trust is my awareness. It is something for you to find out for yourselves. You can't just trust what I say. Anything I describe now is simply an encouragement for you to develop this trust in awareness.

This inclusive awareness is very simple and totally natural. The mind stops and you are open and receptive. Even if you're tense and uptight, just open to it by accepting it and allowing it to be as it is. Tension, despair, pain – you allow your experience to be exactly as it is rather than try to get rid of it. If you conceive of this openness as a happy state, then you create a mental impression of it as a pleasant state that you might not be feeling and would like to feel. Being in a pleasant state of mind is not a prerequisite for inclusive awareness. One can be in the pits of hell and misery and yet still open to the experience of being aware, and thus allow even the most upsetting states to be just what they are.

I've found this to be a real challenge, for there are so many mental and emotional states that I don't like at all. I've spent my life trying to get rid of them. From childhood onwards one develops the habit of trying to get rid of unpleasant mental states by distracting one's attention, doing anything to try and get away from them. One develops so many ways of distracting oneself from feelings such as despair, unhappiness, depression and fear – one no longer even does so consciously. It becomes habitual to distract oneself from painful experience. The encouragement now is to begin to notice those painful states, even to notice the way one distracts oneself. Inclusive awareness is a state of not really knowing anything in particular. You're allowing things to be what they are, not the way

you *think* they are or the way you think they should be. You don't have to perceive them with thoughts or words, or analyze them; you're simply allowing the experience to be just the way it is. It's more a case of developing an intuitive sense, what I call 'intuitive awareness'. When you can begin to trust in this awareness, you can relax a bit. If you're trying to control the mind, then you tend to go back to your habits of trying to hold on to some things and get rid of others, rather than just allowing things to be what they are.

With intuitive awareness we are taking refuge in awakesness – which is expansive, unlimited. Thought and mental conception create boundaries. The body is a boundary; emotional habits are boundaries; language is a boundary; words expressing feelings are also boundaries. Joy, sorrow and neutrality are all conditioned and dependent upon other conditions. Through awakening we begin to recognize that which transcends all of this. Even if what I'm saying sounds like rubbish to you, be aware of that. Open to the fact you don't like what I'm saying. It's like *this*. It's not that you have to like it. It's starting from the way it is rather than having to figure out what I'm trying to say.

The thought of parting has a certain effect on consciousness. But whatever is happening for you now is just that way, it is what it is. Separation and the idea of separation is like *this*. It's a matter of recognizing what it is but not judging what you see. As soon as you add to it in any way, it is more than what it actually is; it becomes personal, emotional, complicated. This sense realm in which we live, this planet Earth, is like *this*. One's whole life is an endless procession of meeting and separating. We get so used to it that we hardly notice it or reflect on it. Sadness is the natural response to being separated from what one likes, from people one loves. The emotion we feel is sadness, but when the emotion is

held in awareness then the awareness itself is not sad. The same is true when being present with thinking of something that gives rise to excitement or joy. The awareness is not excited, it holds the excitement. Awareness embraces the feeling of excitement or sadness, but it does not get excited or sad. So it's a matter of learning to trust in that awareness rather than just endlessly struggling with whatever feelings might be arising.

Have you ever noticed that even when you're in a state of complete confusion there's something that is not lost in that confusion? There's an awareness of the confusion. If you are not clear about this, then it is easy to attach to the state of being confused and wind yourself up even more, creating even more complications. If you trust yourself to open to the confusion, you will begin to find a way of liberating yourself from being caught in the conditioned realm, endlessly being propelled into emotional habits arising out of fear and desire.

Desire is natural to this realm, so why shouldn't we have desire? What's wrong with desire anyway? We struggle to get rid of all our desires. Trying to purify our minds and conquer desire becomes a personal challenge. But can you do it? I can't. I can suppress desires sometimes and convince myself that I don't have any, but I can't sustain it. When you contemplate the way things are, you see that this realm is like this – what is attractive and beautiful one desires to move towards and grasp; what is ugly and repulsive gives rise to the impulse to withdraw. That's just the way it is; it's not some kind of personal flaw. There is an awareness that embraces the movement of attraction and aversion. You can be aware of being attracted and aware of being repelled.

This awareness is subtle and simple. But if it's never pointed out, we won't learn to trust it, and will tend to relate to meditation

from the mindset of achieving and attaining. It is very easy to go back into this dualistic struggle: trying to get and trying to get rid of. Right and wrong, good and bad – we’re easily intimidated by righteous feelings. It’s very easy to get righteous when we’re dealing with religion. In one way we’re right – we *should* let go of desire and we *should* take on responsibility for our lives and keep the precepts, and we *should* strive on with diligence. This is right, this is good.

Some might accuse me of teaching a path where it doesn’t matter how you behave, that you can just do anything and simply watch it: you could rob a bank and still be mindful of your actions; you could experiment with drinking and taking drugs, or see how mindful and aware you are when hallucinating on mushrooms! If I did teach that, the door would be wide open, wouldn’t it? I’m not promoting that viewpoint. I’m not saying you should disregard the precepts.

The precepts are a vehicle that simplifies our lives and limits behaviour. If we don’t have boundaries for behaviour then we tend to get lost. If we have no way of knowing limitations, then we just follow any impulse or idea. Vinaya and *sīla* is always a form of restriction. It’s a vehicle; its purpose is to aid reflection. But if we grasp it we become a person who obeys all of the rules without reflecting on what we’re doing. This is the other extreme of the complete hedonistic way: you become institutionalized into the monastic form, keeping the party line and obeying all of the rules, being a good monk or nun, feeling that is what you are supposed to do – but you’re not really aware of what you’re doing. Some of you are probably thinking, ‘Well I’m not ready for that yet. What you’re teaching is for advanced students. I just need to learn how to be a good monk or a good nun.’ This is fine, learn how to be a good monk or nun, but also connect with simply being aware.

The doubting mind, the thinking mind, the righteous mind, the suspicious mind will always come up with questions and uncertainties. The thing to do is to avoid complicating matters even more by adopting another role. Learn to see and observe how the restrictions of this monastic form bring into the open one's resistance, indulgence, attachment and aversion. All of these reactions are like *this*. By seeing things in this way you're going beyond the dualistic structures of thought and conditioned phenomena. Your refuge is in the Deathless, the Unconditioned – in Dhamma itself rather than someone else's view *about* Dhamma.

Over the years I've developed this awareness so that now I experience consciousness as being very expanded; there's a huge spaciousness I can rest in. The conditions I'm experiencing both physically and emotionally are reflected in that spaciousness; they're held and supported in it, allowed to be. If I didn't develop this awareness then it would be difficult, because I'd always be struggling with my feelings. At one point in time the sangha will be going well. People will be saying they love Amaravati and want to remain monks and nuns all their lives, and that they believe Theravada Buddhism is the only way. Then all of a sudden they change, saying they're fed up with this joint and want to convert to some other religion. So one can feel dejected and think one has to convince them that joining some other religion is not the way, and get into one's righteous Buddhist mood about how 'right' we are. We can get into thinking we've got everything here, and that it's wonderful and people should be grateful.

One can say, 'Don't be selfish, don't be stupid.' Emotionally we are like that. If we're emotionally attached to the way we do things, then we feel threatened by anyone who questions it. I've found in my own life that whenever someone starts criticizing Theravada

Buddhism, our sangha, or the way we do things, my getting upset about it is due to my personality and its tendency to attach and identify with these things. You can't trust that at all. But you can trust awareness. As you begin to recognize it and know it, you can rest more in being aware and listening to the sound of silence. As you sustain awareness in this way, consciousness can expand and become infinite. When this occurs you are present in a conscious moment and you lose the sense of being a self – being a person, this body. It just drops away and can no longer sustain itself.

It is not possible for emotional habits to sustain themselves because, being impermanent, their nature is to arise and cease. As you rest in awareness you begin to recognize the value of this expansiveness – which some people call 'emptiness'. It doesn't really matter what you choose to name it, so long as you can recognize it. It's a natural state, it's not created – I don't create this emptiness. It's not that I have to go through a whole process of concentrating my mind on something in order to be able to do this and then, having done so, hold my mind there in order to block out everything else. On the other hand, when I was into concentration practices I'd always get frustrated – because just when I'd be getting somewhere someone would slam the door! That type of practice is all about trying to shut out, control and limit everything. It can be skilful to do that kind of practice, but if you hold on to it then you are limited by it. You can't take life as it comes and instead you become controlling of everything. The result of that type of practice is that life has to be a certain way: 'I have to be at this place, live with these people, not with those people; I need these structures and conditions in order to be able to get my *samādhi*.' So then you are bound to that way of structuring your life.

You see monks going all over the place trying to find the perfect monastery where they can get their *samādhi* together. But in this expansive awareness everything belongs, so it doesn't demand certain conditions in which it may be cultivated. Intuitive awareness allows you to accept life as a flow, rather than being endlessly frustrated when life seems difficult or unpleasant.

Coming into the Temple this evening was very nice indeed. The stillness of the place is fantastic. This is the best place in the whole world! That's only an opinion, you know, not a pronouncement. I find the stillness and silence in this place to be palpable as soon as I come in. But then, can I spend the rest of my life sitting in here? Stillness is here in the heart. Stillness is about being present. It's not dependent on a temple or a place. Trusting in your awareness, you begin to notice that even in the midst of places like London and Bangkok, in confusing or acrimonious situations, you can always recognize this stillness once you value and appreciate it. It does take determination to be able to do this. Much of the time it doesn't seem like anything, and having goal-orientated practices seems more attractive: 'I want something to do, something to get my teeth into.' We're conditioned to always be doing something rather than just trusting and opening to the present. We can even make this into a big deal: 'I've got to open to the present all of the time!' Then we just grasp the idea of it – which is not what I mean.

Conviviality is an attitude of being at ease with life, of openness and ease with being alive and breathing, at ease with being present with what is arising in consciousness. If you grasp the idea, 'I should be convivial,' then you've missed the point. What I'm saying is merely an encouragement towards trusting, relaxing and letting go. Enjoy life here, open to it rather than

endlessly trying to perfect it – because that can bind you to a critical attitude. Instead, if there's aversion, open to it and let it be what it is. So I'm not asking that you not be averse, but just to open to that aversion or restlessness, or to whatever positive or negative feelings you may have.

Observing Attachment

CONSCIOUSNESS IS WHAT WE ARE ALL EXPERIENCING RIGHT NOW – it is the bonding experience we all have at this moment. Consciousness is about the realm of form. We experience consciousness through form. When we contemplate the four elements – earth, water, fire, air – along with space and consciousness, this is a totality of experience in terms of an individual human being. The physical condition of a body and the physical realm in which we live is a combination of these four elements, combined with space and consciousness. We can contemplate the four elements in our own body as a way of looking at it where one does not see it as a personal identity or as something belonging to oneself. Space and consciousness have no boundaries; they're infinite. Consciousness, then, is what we're using in meditation in order to contemplate the way things are.

We get confused because consciousness is not something we can get hold of in the way that we can with earth, water, fire and air or conditions of the mind like thoughts and emotions. Because we are conscious we can actually be aware of thoughts and emotions, or the body as it exists and manifests at the present moment.

Sometimes we think of consciousness in a limited way, as simply arising through contact via the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind – just in terms of sensory consciousness. In this case, consciousness is limited to perceiving through the senses. But it is possible to begin to recognize consciousness that is unattached to the senses, which is what I point to when I refer to the sound of silence. When you begin to notice that sound, there is consciousness that is unattached. As you sustain awareness with the sound of silence, you find you can begin to reflect and get perspective on your thoughts, emotions, feelings, sense activity and experience – which all arise in consciousness in the present.

It is important to recognize that this is something really wonderful that we can do. The whole point of the *samaṇa* life is aimed at this kind of realization. Of course, obstruction comes with our commitment to the delusions that we create: the strong sense of being a separate self, identification with the body as being who we are, and the emotional habits, thoughts and feelings by which we create ourselves. We then derive a sense of having a personality that we tend to identify with and allow to push us around. This is why I encourage you to rest and relax into the awareness that comes when you recognize the sound of silence.

Just rest in this state of openness and receptivity. Don't attach to the idea of it. You can attach to the idea of the sound of silence and of attaining something with it, or keep creating some false illusions around it. That's not it. It's not a matter of trying to make anything out of it, but of fully opening to this present moment in a way that is unattached.

This recognition of non-attachment is something you know through your awareness rather than through a description. All one can say about it are things like 'don't attach to anything,'

and ‘let go of everything.’ But then people attach and say, ‘We shouldn’t be attached to anything.’ They attach to the idea of non-attachment! We are so committed to thinking and trying to figure everything out in terms of ideas, theory, technique, party line, the Theravada approach and on and on like this. We bind ourselves to the conditions, even though the teaching is about letting go or non-attachment. This is why I really encourage you to observe attachment. Trust yourself in this awareness. And, rather than holding to the views that one shouldn’t be attached, recognize attachment is like *this*.

In the early days I used to practise attaching to things intentionally, just so I would know what attachment is like, rather than hold some idea that I shouldn’t be attached to anything – and then in some desperate way be always trying to be detached. That would have only been self-deception, because the basic delusion that gave rise to the attachment had not been penetrated. Thinking, ‘I’m someone who is attached and I shouldn’t be’ is an attachment: ‘I am a monk who has all these attachments, these hang-ups. They’re obstructions and I shouldn’t be attached to them. I’ve got to get rid of them, let go of them.’ The attachment to *that* results in you fooling yourself, and endlessly disappointing yourself because you can’t do it that way – it doesn’t work. This is why I emphasize this pure state of consciousness. Now don’t just take it for granted. Don’t try to figure it out or think about it very much. Learn to just *do* it. Just contact this resonating sound or vibration, learn to stay with it for a count of five, or practise so that you get used to it and appreciate it. If you cultivate it, it gives you this state where you begin to be conscious without being attached, so that the conditions that arise in consciousness may be seen in the perspective of arising and ceasing.

When we let go and simply abide in pure, unattached consciousness, that is also the experience of unconditioned love. Pure consciousness accepts everything. It is not a divisive function; it doesn't have preferences of any sort. It accepts everything and every condition for what it is – the bad, the good, the demons, anything. So when you begin to trust in it, the *mettā bhāvanā* practice comes alive. Rather than just spreading good thoughts and altruistic ideas, it becomes practical and very real.

What do we mean by 'love' anyway? To many people, love is the ultimate attachment: when you love somebody you want to possess them. Often what passes for love in modern consciousness is a strong attachment to another person, thing or creature. But if you want to apply this word to that which accepts, then you have *mettā* – love which is unattached, which has no preferences, which accepts and sees everything as belonging.

When you begin to trust in the awareness, the conscious moment that is infinite, then everything belongs in it. From the perspective of this conscious being, whatever arises in this consciousness is accepted and welcomed, whether it's through the senses from the outside or from the inside – in other words, all the emotional and physical conditions that become conscious in this present moment. This sense of love, acceptance and non-judgement accepts everything you are thinking, feeling and experiencing. It allows everything to be what it is. But if we don't allow things to be as they are, then we are trying to get something that we don't have or get rid of something that we don't want. So in terms of purifying the mind, consciousness is already pure. You don't need to purify it; you don't have to do anything.

By not holding on to the conventional view of yourself, you begin to not identify as being this person, this way, this condition, this

body. These views begin to drop away; they are not the way things really are. In terms of meditation, if you trust in awareness then certain things come into consciousness: worries, resentments, self-consciousness, memories of various kinds, bright ideas or whatever. Our relationship to them is accepting, embracing, allowing. In terms of action and speech – the good, which we act on when we can, as well as the bad that we don't – we accept both, non-critically. That to me is what love is, it's non-critical. This applies most to what arises in my consciousness: the kamma, emotions, feelings and memories that arise in the moment. Behind it all is the sound of silence. It's like an enormous, vast, infinite space that allows things to be what they are because everything belongs. The nature of conditions is to arise and cease; that's the way it is. We don't demand that they are otherwise or complain because we'd like to hold on to the good stuff and annihilate the bad. Our true nature is pure. When we begin to realize and fully trust and appreciate this, we see it's real. It's not theoretical, abstract or an idea – it's reality.

Consciousness is very real. It's not something you create. This is consciousness right now. That you are conscious is a fact, it's just the way it is. The conditions we might be experiencing may be different. One person may be happy; another sad, confused, tired, depressed; another worrying about the future, regretting the past and so on. Who knows all of the various conditions that are going on in all of us at this moment? Only you know what is occurring in your particular experience now. Whatever it is – good or bad, whether you want it or not – it's the way it is. So then your relationship to it must be through this purity of being, rather than through identifying with the conditioned.

You can never purify the conditioned. You can't make yourself a pure person. That's not where purity is. When you try to purify

yourself as a person it's a hopeless task, like trying to polish a brick to make it into a mirror. It's demanding the impossible, which means you will fail and be disappointed. The awakened state is the original purity. In other words, you have always been pure, you have never, ever, for one moment been impure. Even if you're a serial killer, the worst demon in the universe, you're still pure because that purity is impossible to destroy. The problem lies not in becoming impure but in the attachment to the illusion we create in our mind: the demon is so attached to being a demon that he forgets his original purity, this presence here and now.

Not Looking for Answers, Not Asking for Favours

I **USED TO HATE** the feeling of being confused. Instead, I loved having a sense of certainty and mental clarity. Whenever I felt confused by anything, I'd try to find some kind of clear answer, to get rid of the emotional state of confusion. I'd distract myself from it or try to get somebody else to give me the answer. I wanted the authorities, the Ajahns, the big guys, to come and say, 'That's right, that's wrong, that's good, that's bad.' I wanted to be clear and needed an authority figure, that I trusted and respected, to straighten me out.

Sometimes we think that things like good teachers, meditation retreats, the precepts, the refuges or a wonderful sangha are going to make us happy and solve all our problems. We reach out for help from outside, hoping this or that will do it for us. It's like wanting God to come and help us out of the mess – and then when He doesn't come and solve our problems, we don't believe in God anymore. 'I asked Him to help and He didn't.' This is a childish way of looking at life. We get ourselves into trouble and expect mommy and daddy to come and save the day, to clean up the mess we've made.

One time, years ago, I became confused when I found out that one of our American Buddhist nuns had left our community and become a born-again Christian. I had just been saying to another nun, 'She's really wonderful, she's so wise, she's so pure-hearted. She'll be a great inspiration to you in your nun's life.' I was really embarrassed and confused when I heard the news. I thought, 'How could she fall for it?' I remember asking my teacher Ajahn Chah, 'How could she do that?' He looked at me with a mischievous smile and said, 'Maybe she's right.' He made me look at what I was doing – feeling defensive and paranoid, wanting a clear explanation, wanting to understand, wanting him to tell me that she'd betrayed the Buddhist religion. So I started looking at the confusion. When I began to embrace it and totally accept it, it dropped away. Through acknowledging the emotional confusion, it ceased being a problem; it seemed to dissolve into thin air. I became aware of how much I resisted confusion as an experience.

In meditation, we can notice these difficult states of mind: not knowing what to do next or feeling confused about practice, ourselves or life. We can practise not trying to get rid of these mind-states but simply acknowledging what they feel like: this is uncertainty, insecurity, grief and anguish; this is depression, worry, anxiety, fear, self-aversion, guilt or remorse. We might try to make a case that if we were a healthy, normal person, we wouldn't have these emotions. But the idea of a normal person is a fantasy of the mind. Do you know any really normal people? I don't.

The Buddha spoke instead of one who listens, who pays attention, who is awake, who is attentive here and now, one whose mind is open and receptive, trusting in the present moment and in oneself. This is his encouragement to us. Our attitude towards meditation need not be one of striving to get rid of things – our defilements,

our *kilesas*,* our faults – in order to become something better. It should be one of opening up, paying attention to life, experiencing the here and now, and trusting in our ability to receive life as experience. We don't have to do anything with it. We don't have to straighten out all the crooked parts, solve every problem, justify everything, or make everything better. After all, there will always be something wrong when we're living in the conditioned realm: something wrong with me, with the people I live with, with the monastery, with the retreat centre, with the country. Conditions are always changing; we will never find any permanent perfection. We may experience a peak moment when everything is wonderful and just what we want it to be, but we can't sustain the conditions of that moment. We can't live at the peak point of an inhalation; we have to exhale.

The same applies to all the good things of life – happy times, loving relationships, success, good fortune. These things are certainly enjoyable and not to be despised, but we shouldn't put our faith in something that's in the process of changing. Once it reaches a peak, it can only go in the other direction. We're asked not to take refuge in wealth, other people, countries or political systems, relationships, nice houses or good retreat centres. Instead, we're asked to take refuge in our own ability to be awake, to pay attention to life no matter what the conditions might be in the present moment. The simple willingness to acknowledge things for what they are – as changing conditions – liberates us from being caught in the power of attachment, in struggling with the emotions or thoughts that we're experiencing.

**kilesa*: unskilful factors such as greed, hate, delusion, opinionatedness and lack of moral concern.

Notice how difficult it is when you're trying to resist things all the time, trying to get rid of bad thoughts, of emotional states, of pain. What is the result of resisting? When I try to get rid of what I don't like in my mind, I become obsessed by it. What about you? Think of somebody you can't stand, someone who hurts your feelings: conditions of feeling angry and resentful with that particular person obsess the mind. We can make a big deal out of it – pushing, pushing, pushing. And the more we push, the more obsessed we become.

Try this out in your meditation. Notice what you don't like, don't want, hate, or are frightened of. When you resist these things, you're actually empowering them, giving them tremendous influence and power over your conscious experience of life. But when you welcome the flow of life, and open up to both its good and bad aspects, what happens? I know from my experience that when I'm accepting and welcoming of conditioned experience, things drop away from me. They come in and they go away. We're opening the door, letting in all the fear, anxiety, worry, resentment, anger and grief. This doesn't mean we have to approve of it or like what's happening. It's not about making moral judgements. It's simply about acknowledging the presence of whatever we're experiencing in a welcoming way – not trying to get rid of it by resisting it, not holding on to it or identifying with it. When we're totally accepting of something as it exists in the present, then we can begin to recognize the cessation of those conditions.

The freedom from suffering the Buddha talked about isn't in itself an end to pain and stress. Instead, it's a matter of creating a choice. I can either get caught up in the pain that comes to me, attach to it and be overwhelmed by it, or I can embrace it, and through acceptance and understanding, not add more suffering

to the existing pain, the unfair experiences, the criticisms or the misery that I face. As with the Buddha: even after his enlightenment, he had to experience all kinds of horrendous things. His cousin tried to murder him, people tried to frame him, blame him and criticize him. He experienced severe physical illness. But the Buddha didn't create suffering around those experiences. His response was never one of anger, resentment, hatred or blame, but one of acknowledgment.

This has been a really valuable thing for me to know. It's taught me not to ask for favours in life, or to hope that if I meditate a lot, I can avoid unpleasant experiences. 'God, I've been a monk for thirty-three years. Please reward me for being a good boy.' I've tried that and it doesn't work. To accept life without making any pleas is liberating, because I no longer feel a need to control or manipulate conditions for my own benefit. I don't need to worry or feel anxious about my future. There's a sense of confidence, a fearlessness that comes through learning to trust, to relax, to open to life, and to investigate experience rather than to resist or be frightened by it. If you're willing to learn from the suffering in life, you'll find the unshakeability of your own mind.

GLOSSARY

The following words are mostly Pali, the language of the Theravada Buddhist scriptures (Tipiṭaka). They are brief translations for quick reference, rather than exhaustive or refined definitions.

Ajahn	(Thai) teacher; from the Sanskrit <i>ācārya</i> ; in the Amaravati community, a bhikkhu or sīladharā who has completed ten Rains Retreats (<i>vassa</i>)
anāgāmi	'non-returner', the third stage on the path to nibbāna
anattā	literally 'not-self, no-self, non-self', i.e. impersonal, without individual essence; neither a person, nor belonging to a person. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
anicca	impermanent, changeable, inconstant, uncertain, transient, having the nature to arise and pass away. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
ārammaṇa	mental object; in Thai usage (<i>arom</i>) also mood, emotion
asubha	non-beautiful. <i>Asubha-kammaṭṭhāna</i> is a practice that involves contemplating the various unattractive parts of the body
attā	literally 'self', i.e. the ego, personality
attakilamathānuyoga	self-mortification, self-torture
avijjā	ignorance, not knowing, delusion

bhāvanā	spiritual cultivation, that which develops calm, kindness and wisdom, as in the Eight-fold Path
bhikkhu	alms-mendicant; the term for a Buddhist monk who lives on alms and abides by the training precepts which define a life of renunciation and morality
bodhisattva	(Sanskrit) literally 'one who is intent on full enlightenment.' As taught in the Mahayana school, enlightenment is delayed so that all the virtues (<i>pārami</i>) are developed and innumerable sentient beings are saved
Chao Khun	(Thai) ecclesiastical title bestowed on a bhikkhu by the king of Thailand
dependent origination	see <i>paṭiccasamuppāda</i>
deva, devatā	celestial being
devadūta	literally 'heavenly messenger.' There are four such messengers: old age, sickness, death and a <i>samaṇa</i> , that which causes one to wake up or question life
Dhamma	the teaching of the Buddha as contained in the scriptures; not dogmatic in character, but more like a raft or vehicle to convey the disciple to deliverance. Also the truth towards which that teaching points; that which is beyond words, concepts or intellectual understanding
dhamma	phenomenon; mental object(s)
Dhamma-Vinaya	the Buddha's teachings and monastic discipline
dhutanga	special renunciant observances; austere practices

dukkha	literally 'hard to bear.' Dis-ease, discontent, or suffering, stress, anguish, conflict, unsatisfactoriness. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
Hinayana	literally 'lesser vehicle.' A term coined by Mahayana Buddhists for a group of earlier Buddhist schools. One of the three major Buddhist traditions: see Theravada
jhāna	meditative absorptions, deep states of rapture, joy and one-pointedness
jongrom	(Thai, from Pali <i>caṅkama</i> q.v.) walking meditation
kāmarāgacarita	a lustful, greedy temperament
kāmasukhallikānuyoga	sensual indulgence
kamma (Sanskrit: karma)	action or cause which is created by habitual impulses, volitions, intentions. In popular usage, it often includes the result or effect of the action, although the proper term for this is <i>vipāka</i>
khandha	group, aggregate, heap – the term the Buddha used to refer to each of the five components of human psychophysical existence: <i>rūpa</i> (form), <i>vedanā</i> (feelings), <i>saññā</i> (perceptions), <i>saṅkhārā</i> (mental formations), <i>viññāṇa</i> (sense-consciousness)
kuṭi	a secluded and simple dwelling for a monk or nun
kilesa	defilement, an item of mental impurity
lokavidū	'knower of the world.' An epithet of the Buddha
Luang Por	(Thai) literally 'revered father.' Title of respect and affection for an elder monk and teacher

Mahayana	one of the three major Buddhist traditions. It lays particular emphasis on altruism, compassion and realization of ‘emptiness’ as essentials for full awakening
mettā	loving-kindness, goodwill
mettā bhāvanā	meditation on, or cultivation of, loving-kindness
nibbāna (Sanskrit: nirvana)	literally ‘extinguishing of a fire’; Freedom from attachments, quenching, coolness. The basis for the enlightened vision of things as they are
paccuppanna-dhamma	what has arisen just now; present-moment phenomena
Pali	the ancient Indian language of the Theravada Canon, akin to Sanskrit. The collection of texts preserved by the Theravada school and, by extension, the language in which those texts are composed
paññā	discriminative wisdom, discernment
pāramī (Sanskrit: <i>pāramita</i>)	‘perfection’; skills and virtues that deepen the mind. In Theravada Buddhism there are ten perfections for realizing Buddhahood: giving, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity
paṭiccasamuppāda	‘dependent origination.’ A step-by-step presentation of how suffering arises dependent on ignorance and desire, and ceases with their cessation
paṭipadā	literally ‘way, path’; putting the teachings into practice
pen paccattari	(Thai) something that you realize for yourself

phra	(Thai) ‘venerable’; an honorific, often applied to a bhikkhu
phra farang	(Thai) foreign bhikkhu
pūjā	literally ‘act of honouring’; a devotional offering made with chanting and bowing
rūpa	form or matter, often referring to the physical elements that make up the body: earth, water, fire and air (solidity, cohesion, temperature, and motion or vibration)
sakadāgāmi	‘once-returner’, the second stage on the path to nibbāna
sakkāya-ditṭhi	personality view, the first fetter that has to be broken for the realization of nibbāna, enlightenment
sālā	a hall: usually where the monastics eat their food and other ceremonies are held
samādhi	meditative concentration, collectedness
samaṇa	contemplative, renunciant, religious seeker, (term for bhikkhus, samaneras or nuns)
samanera	novice monk
samatha	calm, tranquillity, steadying, stilling, settling
saṃsāra	endless wandering; unenlightened existence
saṃsāra-vaṭṭa	the cycle of birth and death
Sangha	1) the community of renunciant disciples (monks and nuns); 2) collective of those who have experienced some degree of realization (<i>ariya Sangha</i>). As a Refuge, ‘Sangha’ refers to the second meaning

saṅkhārā	mental formations, conditioned phenomena in general; the impulses, reactions and psychophysical activities that generate kamma, also the resultant habits that they create
saññā	perception
sati	mindfulness, awareness
satipaṇṇā	literally ‘mindful wisdom’
sati-sampajañña	literally ‘mindfulness and clear understanding.’ Also intuitive awareness, apperception
sīla	moral virtue, also used to refer to the precepts of moral conduct
sīladharā	‘one who upholds virtue’; a term used for Buddhist Ten-Precept nuns in communities established by Ajahn Sumedho
sotāpanna	literally ‘stream-enterer’, one whose realization has transcended the first three ‘fetters’ or mental structures that block awakening, i.e. identification with one’s personality, attachment to customs and systems, and unwavering uncertainty as to Dhamma. Having transcended these, a stream-enterer is said to inevitably realize complete awakening (nibbāna) within a maximum of seven lifetimes
sutta	discourse of the Buddha or one of his disciples
Theravada	literally ‘The Teaching of the Elders’, the name of one of the oldest forms of the Buddha’s teachings, with texts in the Pali language. The ‘Southern School’ of Sri Lanka and South East Asia

Tipiṭaka	literally ‘three baskets’, the collections of the Buddhist scriptures in Pali, classified according to Sutta (Discourses), Vinaya (Discipline or Training) and Abhidhamma (Metaphysics)
upāya	skilful means, the different resources used to understand and realize the teachings of the Buddha
Vajrayana	one of the three major Buddhist traditions; primarily associated with Tibet
vedanā	feelings or sensations of pleasure, pain or neutrality
vijjā	clear knowledge, genuine understanding, insight knowledge
Vinaya	the monastic discipline, or the scriptural collection of its rules and commentaries
viññāṇa	sense-consciousness, cognizance
vipassanā	insight, an aspect of wisdom; ‘looking into things’; it arises in meditation through investigating the causes and nature of <i>dhammas</i>
Visuddhimagga	<i>The Path of Purification</i> , a treatise on Theravada Buddhist doctrine written by Venerable Buddhaghosa in approximately 430 CE in Sri Lanka
wat	(Thai) monastery or temple
yāna	literally ‘vehicle’; a Buddhist tradition or school

Ajahn Sumedho

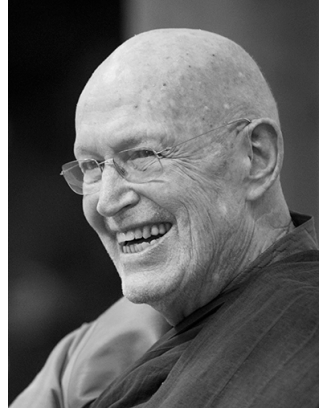
Ajahn Sumedho was born in Seattle, Washington in 1934. After serving four years in the US Navy as a medic, he completed a BA in Far Eastern Studies and a MA in South Asian Studies.

In 1966, he went to Thailand to practise meditation at Wat Mahathat in Bangkok. Not long afterwards he went forth as a novice monk in a remote part of the country, Nong Khai, and a year of solitary practice followed; he received full admission into the Sangha in 1967.

Although fruitful, the solitary practice showed him the need for a teacher who could more actively guide him. A fortuitous encounter with a visiting monk led him to Ubon province to practise with Venerable Ajahn Chah. He took dependence from Ajahn Chah and remained under his close guidance for ten years. In 1975, Ajahn Sumedho established Wat Pah Nanachat (International Forest Monastery) where Westerners could be trained in English.

In 1977, he accompanied Ajahn Chah to England and took up residence at the Hampstead Vihara with three other monks.

Ajahn Sumedho has inducted more than a hundred aspirants of many nationalities into the *samaṇa* life, and has established four monasteries in England, as well as branch monasteries overseas. In late 2010 he retired as abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in Hertfordshire. Since then he has been living in Thailand, and continues to share the Dhamma both there and in other countries.





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